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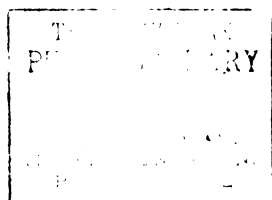
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She turned a lingering glance back at the serene world

THE RED LOCK

A TALE OF THE FLATWOODS

By
DAVID ANDERSON

Author of
THE BLUE MOON

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
W. B. KING

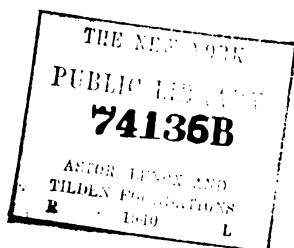


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THE RED LOCK

CHAPTER I

THE BOUND BOY

A GIRL came out of the back yard of a red-roofed cottage at the up-stream edge of Buck-eye, passed around a rather tastefully built barn, with its flanking cribs and pens, crossed the fallow pasture lot in a corner of which it stood, climbed the fence and picked her way up the face of the cliffs that roughly walled the village on three sides, until she stood at last among the jagged and broken pinnacles at the top of Black Rock, a lighter speck against the gray green background of the Flatwoods.

Away beyond the bend where the placid Wabash lost itself among the hills the sun crawled toward the rim of the west. Pendent above the distant timber line its round splendor, burnished

bright by the wonder of May, turned a lingering glance back at the serene world. The bronze glory of that glance streaked across a broad curve of the river and found the girl upon the rock—scintillated up from a dancing riffle, glanced off the face of an upstanding pinnacle of sandstone at her side and tried to match the brown of her eyes; kindled little spots of flame in her hair, glossing alive in the breeze that evening always wakes at the top of Black Rock, the bold headland at the corner of the seamed and craggy wall where Eagle Run had gnawed its narrow side valley through into the main valley of the Wabash.

But the girl was not watching the sunset. The splendor of the wide-spread landscape at her feet was lost on her. The river, slipping along at the far edge of the level bottoms and winking across at her through every chance opening between its fringe of willows and cottonwoods, hardly received a glance. She forgot to imagine that the foot-hills notching the horizon away across on the plains to the south, as they receded in the waning day, were gallant knights faring forth on dangerous quests. She failed to watch the mouth of Eagle Hollow, as the

... ..

shadows gathered between its huge jaws, transform itself into the cave of the dragon.

Crawling out from under the sunset, halving the village and winding away up the river between cliff and bottom, ran the River Road, the one slim artery that connected Buckeye with the great world outside the Flatwoods.

The girl's eyes were on the road. Far up the river—twenty miles of gravel and gray sand—it led to the city. On clear days she had sometimes made out the hazy whiteness of its roofs and spires—the gateway of another world—a world that the errant fancies of girlhood peopled with many a wonder.

She traced out every turn of the brown ribbon of track until it blurred into the shadows lurking under the edge of the east. Seven years ago to a day she had stood there and watched the Milford Stage carry her brother away to the end of that road—through the dim spired gateway and out into the great world beyond. The East—it swallows up many a man of the West. It had swallowed her brother up. It never gave him back.

The eyes, grown pensive, turned slowly to the upstanding pinnacle of sandstone, polished

smooth by a thousand winds, alive in the bronze glow that struck up from the distant riffle. Three names had been rudely carved there, one above the other, so long ago that storm and frost had begun to obliterate them. Lichens, the humble plodders that hide earth's scars, were already creeping into the creases.

The girl picked up a piece of ragged shale and with a sharp corner scraped clean each knife stroke, till the three names stood out clear as the day they were first carved there:—

KEN
TEXIE
JACK

She dropped the piece of shale; thoughtfully passed her fingers over the names and glanced down at the foot of the upstanding pinnacle. In a sheltered pocket of the great rock, where only the tempered rays of the sun could strike it, lay a tiny bed of leaf mold set with clumps of yellow orchids not yet abloom—"lady slippers," in the quaint and expressive vernacular of the Wabash Country—that had doubtless been transplanted from the deep woods.

A strange wild place for an orchid—yet a place ideal in its appointments of soil and shade, that could have been selected only by one well acquainted with the habits and habitat of that modest and self-sequestering flower.

The girl stooped above the tiny flower bed—a friendly spot in its setting of stern rocks; plucked away an obtrusive weed or two; let her sobered eyes stray back to the red-roofed cottage, across a small orchard that lay spread at her feet, and out over the rather pretentious farmstead to which the orchard belonged.

Pretentious—just that; a promise of comfort and affluence never fulfilled. There was every evidence that the farmstead had been laid out on a scale much more elaborate than was usual in the Flatwoods, but nothing had been finished—an attempt that failed; a dream that never came true.

Outlined among the weeds and encroaching brambles lay the extensive foundation of the farm-house, but it had been carried little beyond the foundation. A few sills—huge squared logs, cut and hewed in the upland woods—had been laid. Of the few timbers of the superstructure, some had fallen entirely,

others had fallen at one end and hung straining, while even the firmest canted far out of plumb.

Back of this creaking skeleton of time blackened timbers, and nearer the cliff, stood a mite of a log cabin, rudely constructed, where doubtless a man had housed while dreaming his unfinished dream of house and barns and happy homestead. Rooted beside the door and almost completely covering the cabin, a crimson Rambler of many years' growth—a far wanderer that no surroundings can degrade—offered a fragrant suggestion that a woman had shared the dreams of the man.

A space cleared of weeds about the door gave evidence that the cabin had at least an occasional tenant. From this open space a path led past the corner of the unfinished farm-house and crossed the orchard to the red-roofed cottage; another led to the barn-lot; another led back under the cliff where a spring gushed out from beneath the outcropping ledges, fretted down the sulphur stained gutter it had worn in the gravel and shale, crossed the corner of the fallow yard and zigzagged away through the barn-lot.

Three horses grazed in the barn-lot down near

a big elm that stood at the road gate; some geese squatted along the diminutive rivulet leading from the spring; out in the feed-lot lolled a bunch of cattle, fine and thrifty as could have been seen the length of the Wabash.

The eyes of the girl suddenly waked from brooding; darted to a point a short distance up the cliff; livened. The slouch hat and drab corduroy hunting blouse of a tall young woodsman with an immense spread of shoulder had flitted past a break in the bushes as he sprang down the steep and rugged path that picked its way among the rocks from the uplands. She was just in time to see him reach up, put his hand on the top rail of the fence and vault over into the barn-lot. The girl missed a breath. Few men in the Flatwoods could have made that leap.

Down by the big elm at the road gate one of the horses, a powerful gelding, glossy black save for one white lock in his foretop, raised his head; came trotting up the lot. The big woodsman put his arm about the arched neck; laid his face against the glossy mane and stroked the soft nose.

"Good ol' Graylock!" he muttered—"bound 'r free, t' you a man's a man—"

A shadow subdued the bold frankness of his face, as a chance cloud draws across a fair field; he gazed hard at the wind-staggered skeleton of the unfinished farm-house.

The soft nose of the horse, fumbling the pocket of the man's blouse, roused him. He took off his hat; knocked back a mop of tousled yellow hair with his hand and gazed about him.

His roving eye, following the glow of approaching sunset, found the girl upon the rock, her pliant body softly outlined against the silver-green background of the woods.

"Texie—w'y—!"

In another moment he was racing up the cliff. The girl was waiting for him by the upstanding pinnacle of sandstone, a half sadness in her eyes that gradually subdued the eagerness in his. He laid his big hand on her shoulder; slid it down her arm and gathered her fingers in his great palm. There was not even a twitch of response. He dropped the fingers, backed away a step and stood studying her.

"Jack—? Do y'u know what day this is?"

He puzzled to find the answer she doubtless had in mind; finally ventured the only one he could think of.

"Tuesday, May 10th, 1849."

She flared around at him. "You know that ain't what I mean."

He had taken off his hat. He crumpled it between his hands and looked down at the tops of the orchard trees.

The girl pointed to the carved names on the monolith of sandstone. He followed the motion; stepped past her and ran his hand over the three names, lingering an instant over the middle one.

"Pore Ken—" he muttered, "—he could 'a' be'n anything he wanted to, a'most."

The girl's eyes flinched and turned back to the dim frayed end of the road; the man stood silent.

"Seven years ago t'-day," she mused, "you and me stood up here on Black Rock and watched the Milford Stage haul 'im away off yonder to the city, and out in the big world t' college, and then we—cut them names—"

She paused. He seemed to feel that an answer was expected of him, but made none.

"Two years we got letters—wonderful ones at first. I 'low you ain't f'rgot how we use' t' come up here—you and me—and read 'em." She

spoke more to herself than to him. "Then the letters got fewer and farther b'tween, till fin'ly they got s' trifling' ther' wasn't no satisfaction in gittin' 'em.

"Then, y'u know, that terrible one come from the president of the college, tellin' how awful—Ken was carryin' on, and advisin' father t' take 'im home. But he never come, and a little while afterwards the president writ another letter, tellin' how—Ken had—killed a man and run away from school, leavin' all them debts. That was five years ago—and the last we ever hear'd—"

CHAPTER II

CURSE OF COLIN

It is curious and interesting how some of the greatest names of the Anglo-Saxon race have lodged, like river drift, along the byways and waterways of what was once the great American Woods.

Ken, Texie, Jack—the first two Colins; the third a Warhope—names that have been spread wide on English history. And of the two ancient families, probably no purer strain existed than the far-flung thread that had found lodgment here in this out-of-the-way corner of the earth—the great Flatwoods that seventy years ago stretched for many an unbroken mile along the north bank of the upper Wabash.

The man swept a hand toward the distant end of the road. The girl glanced at him.

“Ten more days”—there was a strained firmness in his voice, as if what he was about to say

came hard to him—"and I'm ridin' out yonder m'self."

"Jack!"

He felt her eyes upon him.

"Ten more," he went on. "This is the tenth of May. When it's the twentieth, I'll be twenty-one—and free. Ten more—I be'n countin' 'em."

A deep seriousness clouded his face; he stared down at the warped skeleton of the unfinished farm-house. The girl fumbled the bit of ribbon at her waist.

"My father dreamed that dream," he went on. "B'fore it could come true, the Seminoles bolted their reservation and he dropped everything and rushed away to the head of the rangers. You know how he—fell at Okechobee." He paused a moment; gripped his hat and went on. "Mother never saw a well day no more. You know how she lingered along down there under the rose vine till I was twelve. When she—died, it was found out Pap Simon had a mor'gage on everything. He foreclosed; had me—bound out to 'im; and—"

The girl stole a look at his face. It was so hard and bitter that she dared not venture a word. And what word could alter the stern fact

that he *was* a bound boy—bound out to her own father.

She glanced away along the distant windings of the road.

“When men of the woods ride out—yonder, they don’t come back. Ken—didn’t.”

The man’s eyes searched her face for some hidden meaning in her words; apparently did not find it.

“I ain’t aimin’ t’ let the big world out yonder swaller me up like it did—Ken. Some flatboat-men told me yesterd’y there’s a wagon train makin’ up in the city for the gold diggin’s in California. Y’u know, when a bound boy’s time’s out, the man he’s bound to most gener’ly starts ’im off with a hoss and saddle and bridle. Pap Simon said he fig’r’d on givin’ me Graylock.”

He tossed his hand toward the barn-lot where the splendid black horse with the one lock of white in his foretop grazed near the foot of the cliff.

“I ’low we’ll jine that wagon train—Graylock and me. And when we find gold, we’re—comin’ back.”

He stole a shy look at her. She dropped her eyes.

"You'll f'rget the Flatwoods when you've found—gold."

He seemed to search her words again for some meaning that he wished much to find. But her face was very thoughtful and turned aside.

"F'rget the Flatwoods! Where else in the world is there a sight like that? The minute I've got money enough I'm comin' back. I'll buy the homestead back f'om Pap Simon; finish the house; and then—"

An arm unconsciously reached toward her. The movement brought the red-roofed cottage into his line of vision—the red-roofed cottage, where lay a paper that bound him to servitude. He drew his arm back; crushed his hat rim in his powerful fingers.

A wisp of snipe flashed white as they skimmed the plowed ground over in the bottoms; a solitary wild duck fanned his way down the river into the red west; a robin among the top twigs of the big elm flung out an occasional random note of his vesper song.

Down by the rivulet in the barn-lot the geese honked and clapped their wings. The sound aroused the man from the half bitter mood and

he glanced at his companion, to find her eyes upon him.

"Jack—" she hesitated; "do y'u s'pose it *could* be the red lock that made Ken act like 'e did?"

The question was so at variance with the man's trend of thought that he was a long time considering it.

"It ain't the red lock," he finally answered in his slow way, "it's the drop of blood that come along with it. F'r that matter, though, every man gits a bad drop 'r two out of the past. But them bad drops can be overcome, if a man bucks ag'in' 'em. The trouble with Ken was it didn't 'pear like he *wanted* t' buck ag'in' his."

"The 'curse of Colin,'" was the girl's musing comment. "F'r hundreds of years—ever sence the days of 'Red Colin,' the old sea pirate—it's be'n breakin' out in the family every few generations. It alw'ys worried Ken that it broke out on him. I've sometimes thought it would 'a' be'n better if he'd never 'a' found out the meanin' of that red lock—that it *was* the 'curse of Colin'—"

"That's it," he commented. "I 'low Ken fig'r'd the curse had 'im anyhow, and so it wasn't wo'th while t' buck ag'in' it."

"Mother kep' the lock cut off, y'u know, till Ken was big enough t' notice it himself. After that he alw'ys kep' it combed under so's it didn't show. I don't reckon anybody in the Flatwoods but you and me and father know'd 'e had it."

"Yes," the woodsman interrupted, "ol' Uncle Nick Wiffles knows. But that's as good as sayin' it's dead and buried. Nothin' ever gits a-past Uncle Nick's jaw."

He grinned, pushed up the mop of tousled hair that fell over his brow and pointed to a scar.

"That's where Ken struck me with 'is whip han'le the day I found out 'e had it."

The girl ran her slim fingers over the scar.

"And he cut *me* with the whip b'cause I flew at 'im when 'e done it."

"And then I hit 'im with a rock b'cause 'e cut you."

The girl shivered.

"I thought he'd kill y'u that day," she said. "His hat fell off, his hair was mussed, and y'u know how awful it made 'im look when that red lock worked out and fell down over 'is eyes—wild and savage and terrible; like ol' 'Red Colin' must 'a' looked. He jerked y'u up and

drawed the butt of 'is whip—mercy! It makes me shiver t' think about it. But he only laughed—hard and wild—and let y'u go."

A smile crawled across the bold features of the woodsman, narrowed his eyes and pinched out two queer little wisps of friendly frankness.

"Them was the good days," he said, "with him big brother to us both! That is," he added, as an afterthought, "when he was—at 'imself. I don't reckon there's one tree down there in the orch'id we ain't clubbed 'r clum, you and him and me, less'n it might be that ol' sour apple-tree yonder in the fur corner."

"And I use' t' git mad b'cause y'u wouldn't lift me."

The smile broadened on the man's face.

"I would—now."

The girl threw up her head and laughed—a laugh like distant music across still water.

"I don't need t' be lifted now."

The man studied her quizzically out of the puckered corners of his eyes.

"This ain't Fourth o' July, n'r Chris'mas, n'r nobody's weddin'. How come the scenery?" He reached out his big hand and touched the smart bow of ribbon at her waist.

"W'y, didn't y'u know, the new preacher's a-comin' on the Milford Stage this evenin', and we're all goin' t' meet 'im—you, too."

The twinkle at the corners of the man's eyes deepened.

"Am I?"

The sly note in his voice did not escape her. She flashed around at him a queer little twist of her face.

"Wasn't it lucky—father got a letter from 'im the very next week after ol' preacher Mason died. He answered it right off, and yesterd'y got another from 'im sayin' he'd be here this evenin'. It's the head trustee's place t' 'ten' t' things like that, you know."

It did not occur to the woodsman that this explanation implied that he didn't know much about church matters. As a matter of fact, he didn't.

"Father's already fixed it f'r 'im t' have the use of ol' preacher Mason's study at the parsonage—Mis' Mason's terrible lonesome sence the ol' preacher died, and he'll be company. He'll do 'is writin' and makin' up 'is sermons there. He'll board with us—he ain't married, y'u know."

She paused and laid a hand on the man's arm. He covered it with his great palm; looked hard at her, with suddenly sobered eyes.

"He was a classmate of—Ken's," she went on, "and he's now one of the teachers and preachers in the very college where Ken went."

The man's eyes widened. She drew her hand from under his palm.

"I 'low that's why father was s' quick t' hire 'im; and mebbe that's why he was s' willin' t' come. He ain't none too well, his letter said, bein' nigh broke down with teachin' and preachin', and he 'lowed this would be a good place t' rest up in."

Her eyes swept the serene landscape; the man watched the sunset play upon her hair.

Suddenly she raised an arm and pointed to the blurred end of the road. His eyes followed the direction of her rigid finger. The Milford Stage was just crawling out of the bronze shadows and coming into view. The next moment she had seized his hand and was dragging him, half unwilling, down the cliff.

CHAPTER III

EAST MEETS WEST

OF THE four stages that passed through Buckeye each day—the evening stage from up the river—from the city twenty miles above—was by far the most important. Its arrival was the one big event of the day. Half the village was usually gathered about the broken porch of Zeke Polick's general store to see it come in.

The Buckeye post-office shifted back and forth across the River Road about as often as the nation changed presidents. Zeke Polick was a Whig, and the man in the White House in far-off Washington happened to be a Whig. That's why the post-office was in a store on the north side of the road in the year of grace 1849, instead of in a store on the south side.

The River Road was a bigger institution than the town. It not only halved the town; it well-nigh halved its political faith. From the Warhope farmstead at the east edge to the school-

house at the west edge, it formed, in political years, a sort of "devil's lane" between the north siders and the south siders. The farmstead and the red-roofed cottage—which is to say Jack Warhope and the Colins—were both on the north side of the road.

Simon Colin had once been Zeke Polick's partner, but had dissolved the partnership years before to follow the more lucrative business of lending money and collecting rents—mostly his own. A banker without a bank, so shrewd was his judgment and so hard the bargains he drove, that half the Flatwoods was under mortgage to him.

He still kept a sort of office in the store—a corner at the front closed off by a low fence of ordinary garden palings, with a sagging gate of the same material, that, in the many years it had been dragged open and shut, had grooved a deep half-circle upon the floor. Within was a desk by the dusty window; a narrow shelf nailed along the tops of the palings at the longer side; a chair; a table against the wall, on it three or four law books that were never opened. There was no safe. That was at the red-roofed cottage.

Not a very imposing office—but the commerce of the Flatwoods passed across those time faded, unpainted palings. Even Zeke Polick, Simon's closest business associate, would have been astonished to know the actual wealth that journeyed in an old satchel back and forth every day between house and store.

Dangerous?—twice the attempt had been made to see inside that satchel, and a man had died each time. The old banker carried a huge double barreled horse pistol, loaded half to the muzzle with buck shot, and he knew the way to its light trigger as the weasel knows the way to its den.

And the safe at home—a cracksman from the city tried that one night. The old man blew a hole in his ribs the size of an open hand with a sawed off shotgun he always kept near his bed.

The old banker had just closed his desk, picked up the rusty satchel, scraped open the sagging gate, scraped it shut, and come out on the porch of the store when his daughter and the big woodsman joined the crowd around the post-office—a crowd doubly large, gathered for the doubly auspicious occasion.

The girl ran to her father and slipped an arm about his waist—about the waist of his coat, to be exact, for the tall figure was mostly coat—a frock coat that had once been black, but which time had bleached to an uncertain reddish brown. He looked down at her and grunted. It was the only sign he gave that he knew she was there.

Up beyond the Warhope farmstead there came a prodigious rattle of wheels, a clatter of iron shod hoofs, and the Milford Stage dashed into sight; roared across the wooden bridge where the River Road crossed Eagle Run; rumbled past the church into the village and pulled up in front of the post-office.

The crowd flocked around it. The guard threw off the mail sack. Zeke Polick picked it up and carried it in. The driver sprang down from the box; ran around the double team; patted the noses of the leaders; looked at the harness, the wheels; remounted the box; gathered up the reins; cracked his whiplash, and the lumbering stage rattled away down the river.

One passenger had alighted, a tall young man wearing a full beard, neatly cropped and

pointed—the new preacher, without a doubt—quite the oddest array of satchels and umbrella, patent leather boots and high hat, stiff neck stock and enormous spectacles, that had ever invaded the Flatwoods.

The natives winked at one another and grinned—on the off side. Jack Warhope was possibly the only one to notice that the young preacher, beneath the odd trappings of his calling, carried what looked to be a very capable body, tall and strong.

He seemed nervous as he stood at the side of the road peering through his enormous spectacles, slightly amber tinted, upon the crowd.

The old banker, with his daughter a step behind him, advanced, touched his faded black hat and extended his hand.

“The Reverend Caleb Hopkins, I ’low?”

The eyes behind the huge spectacles lighted. The young preacher dropped one of his satchels and met the outstretched hand.

“Ah—Mr.—Colin, I take it?”

“All but the mister. I’m jist plain Sime Colin.”

The old man grinned, as broadly as the pinched shrewdness of his dry face would allow. The man of books studied him as a scien-

tist might study some new and interesting specimen. The banker talked on.

"I want y'u t' meet my daughter." He half turned; jerked his thumb toward the girl; jerked it back toward the preacher. "Texie, Mr. Hopkins."

The young preacher touched his tall hat; dropped his other satchel, grasped the girl's hand in both his own and pressed it closer than the occasion could possibly warrant.

It may have been merely the expression of a genial nature touched with the fervency of his profession—the outflowing of a benevolence that embraced all humanity—but even so, it brought a quick flush to the girl's face, and drove her eyes to the ground.

The old banker had turned to the crowd.

"Step up, step up," he called, "and shake hands with the new parson. The way y'u hang back, he'll think he's drapped off amongst a pack o' publicans and sinners."

He seemed to think the remark topped the occasion with particular nicety, for his dry face crinkled up into a splintered grin and he rubbed his bony hands together like a man very well satisfied with himself.

The crowd had evidently been waiting for

just such an invitation. Many a man wiped a grimy hand on his blouse; many a woman's hand stole under her apron—it was against Buckeye etiquette ever to offer a hand to the preacher without first wiping it. Stolid faces raveled into grins, and the quaint vernacular of the Flatwoods had an airing. Odd bits of philosophy, ancient jokes, that nobody would have dared to spring on his neighbor, were freely sprung on the hapless and helpless sojourner from the polite East.

Phrases that had done duty on similar occasions were brushed up and given another fling. Hanner Polick made the same speech that she was known to have made six times before. Aunt Liza Wiffles "'lowed" he was "middlin' young f'r a preacher," and pursed up her lips and hitched them around toward the right ear in a way that dared anybody to dispute it.

The informal reception was over and most of the crowd gone when Texie noticed Jack Warhope still leaning against the porch post where she had left him. She ran back, caught his arm and dragged him forward.

"Mr. Hopkins, meet Ja—Mr. Warhope."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Warhope."

The young preacher stretched forth his hand; the other grasped it. The peering eyes behind the heavy glasses studied him with curious intentness, but the woodsman, only mildly interested, missed the inquisitive look.

The old banker had taken a step up the road.

"Well," he said, "I 'low that jist about winds up the how-d'-y'-doin'. Texie, run in and git the mail, and we'll be moseyin'."

He half turned and glanced back over his shoulder at the preacher.

"I've dickered the use of our ol' preacher's study f'r y'u at the parsonage. Sister Mason—the widder, y'u know—she 'lows she'll be right glad t' have y'u come over and use the study, she's that lonesome sence the parson died. We'll stop as we go a-past, and you can take a look at the study, and meet Sister Mason. But, as I writ y'u, I'm aimin' f'r y'u t' put up with me, at least f'r a few days"—the brisk raspy voice softened—"I'm honein' t' have a talk with y'u about—the boy."

He glared down at the road; the preacher studied him curiously.

So long had the old money-lender been accustomed to dominate everybody about him that it

did not once occur to him to inquire what the preacher's wishes might be. He strode another step or two up the road, remembered that his daughter had gone in after the mail, stopped and frowned half impatiently toward the store door. The preacher picked up his two handbags and waited. Jack Warhope had gone back to the porch and was again lounging against a post.

At that moment Texie came out with half a dozen letters in her hand, saw the big woodsman, and, with a tiny wisp of roguishness in her eyes, stopped on the edge of the porch.

"Mercy! but you're a hard man t' herd. Don't y'u know you're goin' along home with us t' supper?"

"First I hear'd of it," the woodsman drawled, shifting his shoulder against the post.

The girl glanced at the preacher standing at the edge of the road, jerked her head ever so slightly toward him—a motion so elusive that it would have escaped anybody else but Jack Warhope—and lowered her voice to a whisper:

"We'll git 'im t' tell us about—Ken."

She turned away. The shoulders left the porch post, and the man followed.

The old banker was holding out his hand for the letters. He glanced them over, grunted, thrust them unopened into the pocket of his faded coat; muttered a word, drew them forth again, sorted out one, stared hard at the address and post-mark; and then, with a half petulant grimace, knocked the bunch of letters together, crammed them back into his pocket again and, followed by the others, trudged away up the road.

CHAPTER IV

WHISPERING SPRING

THE venerable widow, like the rest of the village, must have been on the lookout for the new preacher, for she was at the door to meet him as he came up the walk with the others. The old banker presented him.

"So glad to have you come, Brother Hopkins. It has been so dreadfully lonesome since—!"

The mild old eyes floated full of tears. The preacher seemed not to notice.

"I saw your husband's obituary in one of the church papers."

The widow dabbed at her eyes with a black bordered handkerchief; the preacher, in his hesitating, jerky way, went on.

"I immediately wrote to Mr. Colin offering to come on a—ah—sort of vacation trip and serve the congregation until the vacancy could be filled. I was the more attracted to the thought of coming because my health had given way

under the dual strain of preaching and teaching. And then, too, I had heard much about Buckeye and the Flatwoods from a—ah—classmate of mine while a student in the college in which I now have the honor to hold a professorship.”

The banker frowned thoughtfully; Texie glanced at Jack.

Evening shadows were gathering thick in the corners of the room. The old man, becoming aware of them, glanced about him and turned to the widow.

“Well, Sister Mason, if you don’t mind, I’ll jist show Brother Hopkins the study, and then you better g’ ’long over with us t’ supper.”

With the fine courtesy of one trained to the parsonage, she excused herself; the old banker went on:

“I b’lieve you said he was t’ have the use of the study?”

The Widow Mason was only too well used to the crisp curt ways of Simon Colin. She turned to the young preacher.

“Brother Hopkins, I don’t want you to feel that you are to have *merely* the study. My home is your home. Please feel free to use all of it or any part of it.”

The young preacher bowed very low, and turned to the banker, who led the way up the stairs with as much authority as if he owned the place—which, in reality, he did.

The study, with its writing desk and leather easy chair, with its shelves and shelves of books, showed that its late owner had been a man of studious habits and apparently scholarly attainments. The cozy neatness of it bespoke with equal positiveness the taste and care of the woman who had kept his house in order.

A large double window on the south flooded the study with light and afforded a beautiful view of the yard, the road, the wide bottoms, with the silver fringe of the river rimming the farther edge. An east window added to the cheerfulness.

An immense apple-tree grew by this east window, thrusting its stout branches so close as almost to brush the panes. Through its opening blossoms and half sprung leaves enough of the day remained to catch a view of the old banker's two or three acres of park-like orchard that lay between the parsonage and the red-roofed cottage, with the waters of Eagle Run loitering along under the blossoming trees.

The young preacher stood at the window and gazed out over the orchard, aromatic with promise, green with its thick mat of blue-grass, white under the trees where the blossoms snowed down.

The banker slapped him on the shoulder. He must have been deeply absorbed in the spell of the place, with its quiet and repose, for he started and laughed nervously.

"I must have been dreaming."

The old man tossed a hand toward the window.

"Not s' bad, is it?"

"It is very beautiful—the trees and grass, with that little branch loitering along and rafting the apple blossoms away to the river."

"I 'lowed y'u'd like it." The old man rubbed his long bony hands together in a sort of grim satisfaction. "My daughter fools away hours and hours in that seat yonder under the big maple by the spring. I 'low ther' ain't a bird comes by she cayn't mock."

The preacher looked at him curiously, half sternly.

"I can well believe you," he said. "A girl like your daughter, with her quite obvious gifts and

possibilities, and so much a part of this wonderful profusion of wild nature about her, would naturally seek some such diversion to keep her life from starving in this out-of-the-way place."

The money-lender pondered these words and seemed on the point of resenting them; but only jerked his thumb toward the window again.

"Took a right smart pile t' fix it up like that. Money wasted, I tell 'er. We'll go across that way t' the house, if y'u like."

"It would please me greatly."

The momentary sternness had left the eyes behind the spectacles, the jerky precise voice had resumed its effusive drawl.

When they came down, Texie and Jack had already gone out into the yard. Mrs. Mason was standing in the door, talking to them.

The gray-haired gentlewoman turned to the preacher.

"Brother Hopkins, won't you please run over for a few minutes after supper? I have so longed to talk with a minister since—since—"

"It is a minister's duty to go where his people call him," he said, in a voice pitched to reach the ears of the others, as it might have seemed. "I shall be very pleased to come."

He bowed himself out and joined the half impatient banker on the door-step.

"Come on," the old man called to the others down the walk, "we're goin' across the orch'id. Brother Hopkins 'lows he'd like to."

The girl turned back, with a barely perceptible nod to the woodsman; a nod that was almost as much a part of her as her dimples—a nod so tiny that it seemed hardly to get beyond her eyes, yet it could have set Jack Warhope to a journey around the world. He turned and followed her.

There was no gate between the banker's park-like orchard and the parsonage yard. The fence had to be climbed. When they reached it the preacher offered his hand to the girl, who, to the amazement of the woodsman, took it and allowed him to lift her down—a concession that meant much in the Flatwoods.

It was the very thing they had talked about—laughed about—on Black Rock barely half an hour before. The thought drew his eyes up to the commanding battlements of the headland. Enough of the afterglow of sunset fell from the west to bathe its stark pinnacles in a faint blush of dull bronze.

The ways of a woman! The man brought his eyes back to the grass at his feet and absently tramped along with the others.

At the bridge over Eagle Run—merely a huge foot log broad-axed flat along the top—the girl allowed the preacher to assist her again, and the woodsman was treated to his second surprise. He had seen her, hundreds of times, skip across that log as sure-footed as a squirrel.

The path beyond led past the big maple with the rustic seat beneath the shelter of its far-flung branches. At its roots a spring gushed up, lapping the white pebbles of the tiny gutter it had worn for itself on its way to Eagle Run. The girl ran on ahead to the spring, the others gathered around her and stood listening to the purr of the water washing against the pebbles.

“Whispering Spring,” she said simply, raising her eyes to the preacher. “Jack named it that. He can think of s’ many names f’r things. He’s a poet, I guess.”

The woodsman fidgeted. The preacher glanced toward him, but made no comment.

“My brother, Ken, use’ t’ tell me the fairies come down out of the cliffs at night t’ dance around Whispering Spring, and I b’lieved him

—I b'lieved everything he told me them days—
and I use' t' watch f'r the fairies.”

She looked up at the preacher; then back into the spring.

“Do you b'lieve in fairies?” She asked the question as if she hoped he *did* believe in them.

He glanced down at the reflected face in the water.

“Yes; there's a fairy peeping into the spring right now.”

The old banker grunted; the woodsman turned to the face behind the huge spectacles. It was the first thing the preacher had said that caught his interest.

The girl was so entirely an unspoiled creature of the woods that she let the preacher see how much the neat compliment pleased her. With the color tingling over her face, she sprang over the gnarled roots of the great maple and ran a few steps up the path to the edge of the yard, paused and then hurried on. The preacher looked after her in his peering way, while the woodsman strode up the path and overtook her at the kitchen door.

“I'll run over and do the chores, and then come back,” he said.

He walked on a little way and then came slowly back. The girl, just going into the kitchen, seemed to know that he had turned—seemed to know that he *would* turn back. With her hand on the door casement she waited for him to speak.

The man glanced out over the orchard; up the side of the cliffs; along the timber line that bearded them; came back to the eyes. The inquisitiveness had lessened; the roguishness deepened.

“You let ‘im—lift y’u—!” he muttered.

With an odd, hard little laugh she darted in at the kitchen door.

CHAPTER V

THREE CANDLES

THE last flare of sunset had followed the Wabash out under the rim of the west by the time Jack Warhope had finished his chores. Barely a memory of the day that had gone played up above the forest line far down the river, and the serene night was already beginning to polish up its stars, when he came back along the orchard path to the red-roofed cottage.

From the porch at the front of the house, as he paused at the side gate of the east yard, came the drone of the banker's voice, broken occasionally by the preacher's precise, jerky sentences.

Warhope listened a moment. The money-lender was talking about a quarter-section that he had foreclosed on the day before. The woodsman had heard many an hour of *that* talk. With a shrug of his shoulders, he pushed the gate open and walked around to the kitchen door.

With a step that the woods had made light as a falling leaf he slipped in and stood motionless. The portly, pudgy form of Mrs. Curry, the housekeeper, was bent over the cook stove, busy with the supper—a meal to which she was doubtless giving the highest touches of her art, since the new minister was to be a guest. Mrs. Curry had a reputation to maintain.

The flit of a shadow and the clink of dishes in the adjoining dining-room told the grinning intruder that Texie was “settin’” the table. For such an occasion there would be a white cloth, the best silver would be out, and there would be three candles instead of one.

The clink of the dishes ceased and the girl appeared in the doorway between the two rooms, a big apron hiding the bit of ribbon at her belt, her cheeks the redder from the heat of the kitchen. Seeing Jack, she paused, tried to look severe but failed.

“Now look at that!”

Mrs. Curry straightened, and exclaimed:

“Big Jack—! Mercy, how you *can* slip up on a body.”

“Put ’im t’ work, Mis’ Curry. We don’t ’low no loafers, do we?”

The housekeeper in reply was interrupted by a misbehaving skillet and she turned back to the stove.

The girl was carrying a large water pitcher. She handed it to the man and nodded toward the outdoors. He well understood that nod. It was not the first time that he had been so "invited" to bring the water from the spring.

As he turned to go he glanced back over his shoulder at her; motioned guardedly with his finger; jerked his thumb toward the spring and stepped outside.

The girl glanced toward Mrs. Curry, raised a finger in feigned caution and tiptoed after him. Once out in the yard, she unexpectedly flashed past him and darted toward the spring. He caught her at the roots of the big maple, and coaxed her for a delicious moment down on the rustic seat.

Supper was on the table, and Mrs. Curry had called the two men in off the porch, when that pitcher came back from the spring.

The woodsman set it down by the housekeeper's plate and took his place with the others. The banker dropped his hands in his lap, nodded toward the preacher and bowed his head.

The traditions of the Flatwoods called for a long and sonorous grace—a sort of sermonette—when the preacher was a guest, but the new minister seemed never to have heard of any such tradition. The grace he said was so short, so direct and concise, yet so beautiful in thought and diction that the banker looked at him in pleased surprise when it was over.

But for all the expectation aroused by the beautifully worded grace, it soon became apparent that, unlike most of his brethren of the cloth, the new minister was not a talkative man. Once or twice he spoke of his many travels, in a way that caught the wide-eyed attention of the girl across the table from him, but for the most part he sat in dignified silence and listened respectfully to the banker.

For the matter of that, it was about all he *could* do—listen. The old man had one subject that he talked on—his business. He monopolized the hour with it; filled the preacher full of it; crowded out all other conversation, and mortified his daughter.

Supper over, there fell a moment of silence—the delicious breath of repose that almost always follows the evening meal in quiet coun-

try homes. The old money-lender sat marking on the table-cloth with his fork, as if mapping out the boundary lines of other quarter-sections that he hoped to have the chance to foreclose on soon.

The girl seized the favorable moment—the first that had come—and leaning forward, said: “Now, Mr. Hopkins, tell us about—my brother—Ken. I’ve be’n wishin’ all evening t’ ask y’u.”

Her father stopped marking on the table-cloth and sat very still; the housekeeper crossed her knife and fork on her plate, as the Christians of Spain used to do in the days of the Moorish domination; the woodsman let his thoughts revel in the faultless profile of the girl’s face. The preacher caught the wistful look in her eyes—the subdued eagerness of one who could not resist the desire to ask, yet dreaded the answer. He fumbled his napkin.

“Really, Miss—Colin, there is very little to tell. Your—brother was the—ah—most puzzling psychological problem that I ever tried to solve. He could have been one of the most brilliant scholars the institution ever turned out. He literally drank up everything the college had to give, and that without apparent effort—as the

desert drinks the dew. His penmanship; his drawing; his command of English—very remarkable. I was his room mate and classmate, and yet I never saw him apply himself seriously to study. I don't think he did. And that was probably his limitation—learning came too easy to him. It can, you know.”

He stopped, as if he had no more to say; stared at his napkin and folded it with careful precision.

“The president's letter said that—that—?”

The girl seemed unable to finish the question, but the preacher guessed what she wanted to know. He again fumbled his napkin, unfolded it, and looked around the table. It was an embarrassing moment.

“With all due respect to you, his family”—he glanced at Mrs. Curry and the woodsman—“and friends, though I would rather not speak of it at all, and should not do so, only that it is my duty as your minister to tell you the truth—Kenwood Colin was a very severe trial to the college authorities. His talent for learning was equaled only by his talent for mischief. Yet, wild as he was known to be, nobody thought that he would ever have forgot his father's name. He was deeply in debt before his very

clever forgeries were even suspected, much less detected.

"Then came his sensational killing of a gambler over a card game, and his subsequent escape somewhere into the great underworld of the city. Since that, nothing more seems to have been heard of him."

There was a moment's silence. The girl leaned forward; her lips apart; her eyes wide.

"Pore Ken—!" she said softly. "He couldn't he'p bein' what 'e was. It was the—red lock."

The preacher raised his spectacled eyes up from his plate and stared at the girl curiously.

"Red lock—?"

"Didn't you know 'e had it?"

The preacher looked his bewilderment.

"Then please, please, don't mention that you know it! Please, don't ever! I 'lowed you knowed, bein' his room mate, or I wouldn't 'a' told. He was that 'shamed 'e had it, and alw'ys kep' it combed under so's it didn't show. Nobody in the Flatwoods but us and—Jack, and an ol' hunter we call Uncle Nick, knowed 'e had it."

The banker had been staring at the tablecloth. He lifted his face.

"The 'curse of Colin,'" he commented thoughtfully. "He was a sea pirate in the days of Queen Elizabeth. 'Red Colin,' they called 'im. Looks like his blood would 'a' run out b' this time, but it hain't. Every three 'r four generations it shows up, gener'ly one child in a family with a lock o' hair as red as fire. Nobody would think a lock o' hair and a drop o' blood could set a child back hundreds o' generations t' what ol' 'Red Colin' must 'a' be'n, but it does.

"The minute I saw that red lock on Ken, I knowed 'e was doomed. I've licked 'im and reasoned with 'im and prayed over 'im—but I knowed all the time it wouldn't do no good. That's the main reason I sent 'im off t' the kind of a college I did—where ther' ain't nobody much but preachers a-runnin' it. He didn't like t' go t' that kind, but I hoped bein' throwed amongst men like that might head off what I knowed was in 'im."

The preached leaned back in his chair; dropped his hands in his lap.

"Permit me to say," he observed in his jerky fashion, "that was as grave a mistake as you could possibly have made."

"Mebbe so," the old man answered. "But the devil 'imself couldn't 'a' coped with that boy."

The preacher seemed on the point of making some forceful reply or other; apparently reconsidered it; sat silent.

The old man beat the tines of his fork on the table; gazed absently at a candle, reached over and snuffed it.

"Ain't it strange," he went on, "how the past fangs the present—the past with its sins and blunders and imperfections? Now there's Texie, cradled in the same arms and nursed at the same breast, and she's as different f'om Ken as sunshine is different f'om the wo'st storm that ever wrecked the woods."

He picked up the fork, scraped into a heap some crumbs that lay about his plate; scattered them again.

The preacher put his napkin by. "Heredity plays many a queer trick," he said in a tone of finality.

In the silence that followed the old banker took the bunch of still unopened letters from his pocket, laid it on the table and began to sort them. The preacher looked around the room and, noticing the night at the windows, rose.

"If you will please excuse me, you remember I promised to run over to the parsonage for a few minutes, and Mrs. Mason probably retires early."

The others rose and gathered about him in polite protest, but the preacher insisted. Mrs. Curry picked up a candle and led the way into the sitting-room, while Texie brought his tall hat from a rack in the corner. He took out his handkerchief, flicked away a speck of dust from the shiny crown of it, and stood gazing about, peering through the open door to the right into the room where the banker kept his safe and papers; into the bedroom at the left where the old man slept; past the fireplace and through the open door to the parlor, as if impressed—possibly amused—by the novelty of a Flatwoods home.

His eyes, searching the walls, came at last to the portrait of a woman, framed in gilt and hung above the fireplace.

The girl followed his gaze.

"My mother," she said softly. "Seven years ago she left us; the very year—Ken went off t' college."

"She had a serene face," said the preacher

putting his handkerchief back in his pocket as he turned away. The banker crossed the floor, picked up a key from the mantel and unlocked the door leading from the porch to the parlor.

"I 'lowed I'd better show y'u where y'ur room is b'fore y'u go, so's y'u'll know how t' git in if we're in bed when y'u come back. We Flatwoods folks turn in purty early."

He took the candle that Mrs. Curry was carrying and led the preacher in across the parlor to the spare bedroom opening from it on the east, where the two satchels and umbrella had already been carried.

"I 'low this might be called a preacher's room, purt nigh. Ain't nothin' but preachers slep' in it hardly sence it was built."

The old man chuckled as he led the way back to the porch, closed the parlor door, locked it and handed the key to the preacher.

Before leaving to keep his appointment the young minister turned to the housekeeper and peering into her genial face as if he had to strain his study-tired eyes to see at all said:

"This has been a most enjoyable evening. If all Flatwoods women are such wonderful cooks, I don't imagine many of them die single."

A blarey laugh exploded somewhere in the top of his throat and brought a gleam of white teeth through the heavily bearded lips.

He stopped a moment on the step and fumbled the tall hat.

"Miss—Colin, won't you please accompany me as far as your—ah—Whispering Spring and show me how to get a drink?"

The darkness hid the flush of color that played up into the girl's face. She glanced at the woodsman; turned to the preacher and followed him down the steps.

The big woodsman stood looking after them, stirred by an unfamiliar emotion to see Texie walk away into the dark with another man. Mrs. Curry and the banker went back into the house.

At the spring the preacher suddenly grasped the girl's hand in both his own, and held it with the same fervid eagerness he had shown that evening in front of the post-office. She suffered her hand to remain slightly longer than before, then gently withdrew it.

"Miss—Texie—you will grant me the privilege of calling you by your first name, will you not?"

She did not answer.

"Your—brother, my—room mate, was very enthusiastic about his pretty sister. But even he did not do you justice. You are—"

He stopped abruptly, stared past her into the night, as if groping for words to clothe a thought unusual with him. The look of a tired student came slowly back to his face, and his shoulders drooped as if weary with bearing the burdens of others. Mumbling a further word or two he turned from her, crossed the foot-log with mincing step, and passed on through the orchard toward the parsonage.

The girl listened until there came the creak of a board as he climbed the fence, then walked back up the path and sat down on the porch step.

Words were never too plenty with the woodsman, even in his most fluent moments. He leaned against a post and looked down at her. She seemed busy with her thoughts. The silence was so deep that the clink of the dishes, as Mrs. Curry put them away, and the crinkle of the old banker's letters, as he sat reading them at the head of the dining-room table, carried to them out on the porch. The lap of Eagle Run,

pitching under the bridge at the River Road, came up out of the park-like orchard and across the yard; the hoot of a distant owl boomed down out of the woods.

The man roused himself from the spell of the silence; stepped off the porch and sat down by the girl's side.

"What d' y'u think of him?" she asked.

It was characteristic of the woodsman that he should answer by another question. He ran his big hand up along the porch post and stared out into the dark.

"What d' you?"

The girl laughed—a contented little laugh like the lilt of the happy water at the bridge.

"Oh, I think he's—"

There came a groan from the dining-room, and the sound of a heavy fall. They sprang up and dashed into the house, just as Mrs. Curry ran in from the kitchen. The money-lender lay sprawled on the floor, in one hand an open letter, in the other an empty envelope.

The girl darted across the room and bent above the shrunken figure.

"Jack—! Jack—!"

"Texie, no, don't be flustered. It's jist an-

other one o' them faintin' spells. He'll be all right in a minute."

There was calm reassurance in the level gray eyes, in the big hand he dropped upon the girl's bowed head. He raised the old man in his great arms and laid him on a sofa at the side of the room.

Mrs. Curry had hurried back to the kitchen for cold water and cloths, and Texie was urging Jack to run for the doctor, when the old banker opened his eyes; stared around him in blank surprise; tried to rise; seemed astonished that he couldn't.

"Doctor!"—he panted hard for breath. "Who wants a doctor? It's jist another one o' them fainty spells. Look there—!"

He held up the letter. The girl glanced at it carelessly; then with a quick exclamation, turned it toward the woodsman. And thus holding it between them they read it slowly, word by word.

Somewhere in New York,
May 2, 1849.

Simon Colin,
Buckeye, Ind.

Sir:—

I caught a fellow with a card up his sleeve and called him. He beat me on the draw,

and here I am. This girl here says I can't last till the ink's dry, and I'm not doubtin' her. She's always played square with me. I reckon you wouldn't allow her inside of your little old synagogue down there in the Flatwoods, but she'd be the whitest one there—except Sis.

You've been one hell of a father to me. I've heard you pray by the yard, and I've heard cussin' that was more religious. You starved mother's life out, and you're starvin' the life out of Sis, but you didn't starve my life out, damn you. I've got a drop of ol' Red Colin in me—him that brought all this cussed red lock mess into the family. I've had my fling—and that's more than you can say, with all your money that you've wrung out of better men.

I reckon I've got but a few minutes to live. I'd give half of them to see Sis. But if you'd come in right now, I'd try to get up and kick you out. I'm dyin' as ol' Red Colin died—with my boots on. I'm expecting to meet him and you both—in hell—

Ken Co—

P. S.—Mr. Colin is dead. He died before he could quite finish signing his name. You can see the blot where the pen fell. I am respecting his wishes and sending this letter without any street address, or other marks, whereby you might trace him. His confidence I shall never betray. I will only say that he shall have decent burial.

The girl.

CHAPTER VI

THE ROOM WAS DEADLY STILL

BUCKEYE was the capital of the Flatwoods. Snuggled away in a pocket of the bluffs where Eagle Run breaks through into the valley of the Wabash, it never woke up but once—when a rumor trickled in from somewhere that a railroad was headed that way. But the rumor subsided, Buckeye went back to sleep, and the big world forgot that it was there.

Zeke Polick's general store was the largest in the place. Zeke sold everything, from onions sets to grindstones, including whisky—barrels of it, from "squirrel" to mellow old Bourbon—right from the spigot. A flatwoodsman could buy it as he wanted it, from a drink to a jugful, but "furriners" had to be identified to get it in quantities less than a quart—an identification quite as exacting, though of a different sort, as that required to borrow money from Simon

Colin—which is another way of saying that a man's face went as far in the Flatwoods as his note.

In the mellow evening of the day following the old banker's collapse over the remarkable letter—no syllable of which had been allowed to get beyond the red-roofed cottage—Uncle Nick Wiffles, a tall, iron-gray old man with twinkling eyes, sat smoking a quietly meditative, profoundly reposeful pipe in the one chair of the store, his accustomed seat, a sort of post of honor that no one else dreamed of occupying when he was present—his by right of age, of wit, of wisdom,—dean of the rustic university, the village store.

It was a variegated company that grouped around him in the dim half-light of the feeble coal-oil lamp, with its charred wick and smoke stained chimney.

There was Zeke Polick, the postmaster and proprietor of the store, a little old rag of a man, half lying across the counter and leaning on one skinny elbow, his scraggy hatchet face thrust forward with an air of alert sharpness, as if on perpetual lookout for any chance nickel that might happen to stray in range.

Al Counterman, a one-eyed fisherman, with a complexion like a smoke-dried bacon rind, dangled his long legs from a half emptied goods box, more waggishness twinkling from his one eye than twinkled from most other men's two.

Then there was the blacksmith, with his hard arms, and hands so horny they could hold a piece of iron hot enough to sizzle water. Village loafers were there—aimless, doless drifters who had nowhere else to go; whose shabby clothes and empty heads would admit them to no society except that shifting, cosmopolitan circle at the village store.

Besides these, Loge Belden, said to be a Kentucky mountain man, tall, lanky and just comfortably in his prime, with a reddish-sandy mustache and goatee, leaned on the end of the counter nearest the door, before him the fast disappearing remainder of an uncorked bottle of "squirrel" that he had bought earlier in the day. Little was known of him except that he and his sister had lately moved into an old cabin on one of Simon Colin's farms up at the head of Eagle Hollow, and that he had taken the job of clearing the timber from an upland field and making it ready for the plow. Some said he

had been a pearl fisher, others that he was "wanted" down at Vincennes. The Flatwoods held him at arm's length—and waited.

"Ricollect Jim Rummidge, don't y'u, Zeke?" Uncle Nick remarked as the postmaster, during a lull in the noisy talk, shifted to his other elbow.

"Jim Rummidge, reckon I do that," piped Zeke's thin voice, as he leaned forward across the counter, pulling nervously at two straggling tufts of slate-gray whiskers that struggled for existence upon the sapless parchment at either corner of his bony chin. "Ain't go'n' t' f'rgit 'im, nuther, not right soon I ain't. Went off t' M'souri owin' me a dollar and thirty-four cents, and, I never *did* git it."

"Aw, well, Zeke, don't worry none," Uncle Nick rejoined, "y'u've wormed it outen some other pore devil b' this time, more'n likely."

The blacksmith slapped his heavy hand down on his thigh, the others laughed, the fisherman's frisky eye twinkled and he swore merrily.

Zeke said never a word, but the expression in his little rat eyes might have meant any number of things. He hung sprawled across the counter fumbling the two straggling tufts of whiskers, and one could almost imagine that his

dry face crackled as it wrinkled up in a stingy grin.

"Blamedest feller—that Jim Rummidge," Uncle Nick went on. "Ther' werdn't nothin' but what him an' that brother Si o' his'n wus up to when they wus youngsters. Ricollect one Sund'y Jim tuck it into 'is head t' yoke up a couple o' calves ol' man Rummidge wus calc'latin' t' save f'r oxen, an' 'e coaxed Si t' play off sick with 'im so's they wouldn't haf t' go t' church. Well, the ol' folks werdn't more'n out o' sight when up jumps Jim, an' Si right after 'im, an' they breaks f'r the barn-lot t' yoke up them yearlin's.

"The calves wus purty tame, an' they gits the yoke on 'em all right. Then Jim gits b'hind 'em an' commences t' slap 'em with the rope. But they jist stood thar, leanin' ag'inst one another, feet all sprawled out, an' nary a budge could 'e git out'n 'em.

"'Thunder!' says Jim—y'u know, Zeke, what a lisp 'e had on 'im—'Thunder,' says 'e, 'I kin outpull them calveth m'thelf.'

"'Cayn't,' says Si.

"'Kin,' says Jim.

"An' what does 'e do but ups an' ties the rope around 'im.

"'Twith th'r tailth, Thi, twith th'r tailth,' he holler'd, slappin' the rope an' bracin' 'is feet, the yoke beginnin' t' git heavy on the calves' necks, an' them a-eyin' of it.

"But Si hadn't more'n retched 'is han' f'r th'r tails, let alone twistin' of 'em, when them yearlin's tuck a sudden notion into th'r heads an' lit out quicker'n a cat kicked through the winder.

"The first lunge jerked Jim plum' off'n 'is feet, an' round an' round went them calves, skeer'd to death, bellerin' an' kickin', an' the dust jist a-hoovin' up, with Jim thumpin' along b'hind 'em, an' Si humped up in the middle o' the barn-lot laughin' 'imse'f blue in the face.

"'Sthop 'em, Thi, geish dern y'u, sthop 'em!' yells Jim as the calves come by on another round.

"'Stop 'em y'urse'f,' howls Si, 'y'u'r closter to 'em 'n I am.'"

The grimy blacksmith roared; the crowd joined in; the fisherman laughed till a tear stood in his one eye.

"Sh-h-h—!" warned Zeke, in the midst of the uproar, "hyur comes the parson."

Almost with the words, the dapper, nervously alert young preacher entered the door. In spite of his studious air of riper years, he couldn't

have been more than six or seven and twenty. The trade-mark of his calling was hung all over him. His shiny boots, elaborate frock coat, neck stock, high hat and enormous spectacles fairly shrieked schoolmaster.

And yet one could not help wondering why fate had set such a man as the Reverend Caleb Hopkins to the business of keeping school. Dissociated from all suggestion of theology and chalk, his figure was about all that could be desired in a man—height a trifle above medium; well set up; lithe and graceful—and his face—nothing short of handsome, only for a certain air of peering severity.

To look at him as he entered the door—six feet of lithe young manhood smothering under its ascetic, not to say somber, investiture—one would never have guessed that there was anything wrong with his health, and yet that was precisely what had brought him to the Flatwoods.

And now as he walked past Loge Belden slouched against the counter, he stopped and stood staring curiously at him.

Belden straightened, pushed his bottle back, and seemed on the point of resenting the look,

when the Reverend Caleb quickly turned away, and with a nod passed the group around Uncle Nick and went on to the post-office window at the rear of the room.

"What d' y'u say we ask 'im t' g' 'long," whispered Al Counterman to Uncle Nick as the young minister stood waiting for Zeke Polick to adjust his dirty spectacles on his thin nose, turn up the smoky lamp and laboriously sort over the meager bunch of letters and post-cards.

"Y'u da'sn't," Uncle Nick answered guardedly.

"Watch me, an' y'u'll see whuther I da'st. I ain't a-feared of *no* parson.

"Mr. Hopkins," he called a moment later, stepping in front of the young preacher as he passed toward the door, "a passel of us fellers is goin' a-seinin' up around Alpine Island in the mornin'. I reckon y'u wouldn't like t' go long, n'r nothin', would y'u?"

"Who are going did you say?"

"Oh, me an' Uncle Nick, thar, an' Big Jack Warhope."

"When do you expect to start?"

"Aw, some'r's around the near side o' seven, I reckon. Y'u nee'n' t' bring nothin' but some ol' boots an' ol' clo's t' wade in."

"I have promised to be at the social to-morrow evening at the schoolhouse, which, I am informed, is always held in celebration of the last day of school. Do you expect to return in time for that?"

"Aw, we'll be back by noon—easy."

"Let me see," pondered the preacher, not willing to compromise his dignity by appearing over-anxious. "This is Wednesday; to-morrow is Thursday—I believe I may safely allow myself this recreation. I shall be most happy to avail myself of your kind invitation."

The fisherman stood fingering his hat and staring at the door long after the minister had passed out, the twinkle gone from his puckered one eye, a puzzled look on his smoked bacon rind of a face.

"Well, I'll be derved! Wouldn't that singe y'ur whiskers! I dunno yit whuther he said 'e'd come 'r not."

Uncle Nick threw his head back and fairly roared, while the postmaster rumped up his dry countenance into a half begrudged grin.

"Course he said 'e'd come. Whar wus you brung up at, anyhow? Didn't y'u hyur 'im say he'd 'vail 'imse'f of y'ur kind invyitation?"

Course he's calc'latin' t' come. Zeke, we'll haf t' git Al a new spellin' book an' start 'im t' school next fall."

"Well," muttered the fisherman, as his face cleared and the twinkle came back to his wag-gish one eye, "all I got t' say is: he can use up more dictionary a-sayin' yes than any man I ever hear'd. But ain't 'e some looker— barrin' that killin' rig he's hobbled up in?"

"Most too good-lookin'," piped Zeke.

"Aw, I dunno, Zeke," Uncle Nick observed, "'tain't go'n' t' hurt 'im none. Only drawback I can see is: it's a pity t' waste all them good looks on a preacher."

"Anyhow," put in Al, his rakish eye dancing at Uncle Nick's remark, "if he wus ugly enough t' tree the devil up a thorn bush, I don't 'low it'd he'p 'is preachin' none. An' I reckon he shore must be some preacher, 'r he wouldn't be where 'e is—teachin' in a college that *makes* preachers. I bet y'u he can cipher plum' through any 'reth-metic you can hand 'im, an' they say he's posted on purt nigh ever'thing that's goin' on, 'r ever *went* on."

"That ain't neither hyur n'r there," argued Zeke. "That ain't no more'n his duty, an' what

the taxpayers back whar 'e come from 'r' payin' 'im f'r."

"Duty 'r no duty," rejoined the fisherman, "it's a dern' good sign."

"All the same," snapped the postmaster, "if I had a gal—which I ain't got, n'r never had—I wouldn't want 'er throwed with 'im like Sime Colin's gal is, an' she shouldn't be, nuther."

"Aw, well, Zeke," drawled Uncle Nick, "if she tuck after 'er daddy in looks, I reckon they wouldn't be no *great* danger."

The raucous laugh that followed from the crowd jarred the postmaster. If the blood could have shown through the dry parchment of his cheeks, his face would have flushed. As it was, he squirmed around off the counter, nervously twisting the two tufts of ragged whiskers, his little black beads of eyes snapping excitedly.

"I don't care what y'u say," he shrilled in his high, thin voice, "Texie Colin's got good looks enough, if that's what y'u want. I dunno what Sime Colin's a-thinkin' about. It ain't like 'im, f' take in a teetotal furriner that-a-way, preacher 'r no preacher—don't keer if 'e *was* a classmate o' Ken's. That ain't no recommend, nohow—bein' a classmate o' Ken's—f'r he wus as orn'ry

as the devil makes 'em. They're boun' t' be throwed t'gether more'n they ough' t' be, an' nobody else about the place but ol' Mis' Curry—an' her back in the kitchen half the time, an' the other half out about the smoke-house 'r garden."

"Ain't much more'n a kid, nuther," the blacksmith remarked, apparently thoughtfully impressed, as he searched his pockets for a match.

"Som'er's around seventeen 'r eighteen—"

The postmaster glanced across at Uncle Nick, as if for confirmation of his statement. The old man took the pipe from between his lips and sat tapping the stem against his thumb nail.

"I 'low y'ur not fur off," he answered meditatively to the postmaster's look, the pipe stem against his thumb nail seeming to tick off the years as he cast them up. "Big Jack's twenty past, an' I've hear'n say Texie wus three years younger to a day. That *would* bring 'er right around seventeen 'r eighteen."

"An' s'poson' she is—every lick of it," the postmaster went on. "A gal ain't got none too much sense at eighteen—an' ther' ain't no gal but what can be drawed on, if the right feller comes along."

"Hol' on thar, Zeke, hol' on!" Uncle Nick had been leaning back against a cracker barrel. His chair came down with a bang, and his voice rang like struck metal. "You're goin' a leetle too fur. They's thousan's an' tens o' thousan's o' gals that cayn't be drawed on, no matter *what* feller comes along.

"Ther's a heap more nice gals than men. Ther' never *wus* a bad gal but what ther' wus a bad man first. An' after it's over—she's done. All endurin' the years t' come her heart has t' be drug in the dust, while the man—no, I won't call 'im man, an' I cayn't call 'im beast, f'r the beasts 'r' clean compared—carries 'is head as high as b'fore. I tell y'u, people hain't never looked at them things right. The man d'serves t' be judged accordin' t' the same way the gal is—only more so."

A hush fell over the group. The blacksmith sat patting his foot softly on the floor. Presently his calloused hand came down upon his knee with a sounding slap, while his eyes, dull at most times from long looking into the forge fire, lighted with the fervor of his feelings.

"Good f'r you, Uncle Nick! I agree with y'u complete. That's my kind o' preachin'—right

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t' the p'int. The new parson 'imse'f cayn't beat that, let 'im do 'is dern'dest."

"My sentiments to a hair," chimed in the fisherman. "I alw'ys takes the gal's part an' be damn'd t' the man. That's how I lost this eye. It wus when—but no matter, I hain't never b'grudged it—"

The fisherman's lone eye settled into a vacant stare at a crack in the floor; the hard lines of his face deepened. Could the others have glimpsed back of that seamed and weather-beaten mask, they might have read there the deep graven memory of a day that was dead—a dream and an awakening, a romance and a tragedy—that had driven him, as the storm drives the driftwood, with what the world calls a crime slated against him, to bury his life here with his dog and fishing gear, alone in his bachelor cabin on the river shore.

"Yes, them's mighty fine sentiments," cut the thin edged voice of the postmaster across the silence—and the dream dissolved in the fisherman's eye—"an' I mostly agrees with 'em an' says amen to 'em, an' the new parson may be all 'e's cracked up to be, but still I ain't takin' back nothin'."

Zeke's thin voice ceased, lost somewhere in

the cavernous labyrinth of his sharp, inquisitive nose. He leaned down across the counter again, thoughtfully fumbling the two tufts of wiry whiskers that poked forward from the corners of his dry and furrowed chin.

Uncle Nick prodded down the contents of his pipe with his finger and smoked a while in silence. Taking the stem from between his lips after a time, he blew the smoke away, slowly, as if to get the full taste of it, and waved the pipe across toward the postmaster—a well understood preliminary to a renewal of the argument.

At the moment Loge Belden took another gulp from his bottle of “squirrel,” put the cork in, slapped it tight and slouched up along the counter.

“Say, I’d jist like t’ put one t’ that. This evenin’ as I come up the River Road past this hyur Warhope homestead an’ Sime Colin’s house, I stopped a little bit on the bridge acrosst Eagle Run an’ happened t’ look over in the orch’id b’twixt ol’ Sime’s an’ the parsonage. Y’u know ther’s a spring along the crick thar under the edge o’ the hill—Whisperin’ Spring, I’ve hear’n tell y’u-all calls it— an’ ther’s a bench t’ set on under the maple tree by the spring.

"Well, as I come a-past, thar set this hyur new parson an' that Texie gal on that bench, an' as near as I could make out, bein' purty well along tow'rds dark, he had 'is arm around 'er. You fellers 'r wastin' a lot o' breath on that gal. I 'low the parson—"

The room suddenly was deadly still, with every eye turned toward the door. Belden felt the stillness; hesitated; turned—

In the open door, framed in sharp outline against the dark background of the night-fall, stood the tall form of Jack Warhope.

Belden grinned oddly; muttered a word or two; leaned against the counter and looked down at the floor.

With the reach and spring that only the woods and hills can give, Warhope walked into the room. Al Counterman slipped off the goods box and hitched up his overalls; Zeke Polick slid down behind the counter; the blacksmith smoked hard; Uncle Nick slowly rose from his chair, no detail of the scene escaping him, while the glint that had leaped into his eyes carried him back twenty years toward the days of his manhood.

The woodsman drew a step nearer.

"I 'low y'u must 'a' be'n mistook about that—arm."

"Not a damn bit."

Like lightning came the sharp smack of an open hand that fanned Belden's head back. He leaped away from the counter and struck—a good smashing swing, clean from the hip; but it didn't land. The jaw it was aimed at wasn't there when it came across.

It was easily apparent that Belden had a high opinion of his ability as a rough and tumble fighter, for he stepped right in and mixed it fast and furious—the whirlwind give and take of the mountains. The man he faced ducked or side-stepped or dashed aside everything Belden had, and came back with an occasional jab that was maddening.

Belden lost his temper—the mistake of many a better man—and lunged viciously. He ran into an uppercut to the chin that doubled him back over a barrel of salt. He whirled up, and his right hand clawed the butt of a pistol out of his pocket.

The pistol came out, but that was all. A heavy six-gun leaped from the woodsman's side, a bullet crashed into the pistol butt, gashed

Belden's hand slightly and tore on into the salt barrel.

The woodsman stuck the six-gun back into the holster at his hip, hidden by his hunting blouse, snatched Belden by the collar and jerked him out into the middle of the floor.

"I 'low y'u must 'a' be'n mistook about that arm."

Belden's small beady eyes burned like hot copper as he wrung his hand. He cursed the pain; swallowed hard; finally muttered.

"The light werdn't none too dern' good. I 'low I must 'a'."

The woodsman dropped the other's collar, talked a moment or so with Uncle Nick and Counterman about the seining trip next day—the matter that had brought him into the store—and passed out at the door. The crowd gathered around Belden.

Uncle Nick picked up the broken pistol and stuck it back, muttering as he examined the gashed hand.

"Y'u ort 'a' had more sense than t' pull on him. He ain't no ways spry on talk, but he can pick hick'ry nuts with a six-gun."

CHAPTER VII

ARROWS OF THE RIVER GODS

THE Reverend Caleb Hopkins was at the boat landing in good time next morning, under his arm an old pair of trousers, a faded straw hat and a pair of very light boots to wear while wading, all having been supplied by the good gray lady of the parsonage from the cast-off clothes of her late husband.

The others were already there, sitting in the long skiff, Uncle Nick in the stern, Jack Warhope and Al Counterman at the oars, the latter still holding the boat to the wharf.

In his nervous and mincing way the preacher scrambled in; Counterman shoved off; the oars dropped into the water; and, with the seine coiled up on the stern locker under the experienced care of Uncle Nick, the live box towing behind, the skiff slipped away up the river toward Alpine Island.

The morning was perfect. Hovering just above the water hung a light fog which the sun was fast lifting. In the pulseless air the river lay without a ripple, save where the boat disturbed it, or where some one of the numberless creatures sporting below occasionally swept a fin too near the limpid surface.

The bordering hills caught up each sound and flung it back from a dozen cliffs and glens. Blackbirds tilted on slender willows and swaying reeds along the oozy shore; thin legged snipe flitted dimly along the edges of ripple-lapped sandbars; from the top of a cottonwood on the other shore a crow called down a challenge.

Alpine Island divides the Wabash into two nearly equal channels. The skiff was guided into the north channel, and had glanced along nearly to the head of the island when Counterman rested his oars with the remark that just there would be a good place to make the first haul.

The skiff was accordingly turned in to the island, and the prow drawn up on the sandy margin. Each man, Uncle Nick excepted, hurriedly undressed, stacked his clothes in the boat and drew on his rough fishing garments.

In strict justice to the truth it must be stated

that only Counterman and the woodsman *hurriedly* undressed. The preacher was far slower and quite noticeably embarrassed over the unusual experience, though he set about stacking the frock coat, high hat, and shiny boots in the bow of the boat with the same orderly deliberation he probably observed in the proceeding from premise to premise of one of his sermons. The ragged boots too large, the shabby trousers too tight, the faded straw hat ridiculously unbecoming, it was the queerest wading rig ever seen along the Wabash. The others eyed it askance and winked around at one another. Even the preacher himself must have caught something of the humor of the odd make-up, for his studiously circumspect face relaxed into a suggestion of a grin.

After a mild bit of urging, a prodigious deal of coaching, he was left near shore to hold the brail stick while Jack and Counterman rowed out around as great an expanse of water as the length of the seine permitted, with Uncle Nick in the stern, laying out the folds and looking to it that the lead line fell evenly to the bottom while the cork line held the net properly erect.

On nearing the shore at the completion of the circuit, the two rowers leaped into the water the

moment it was shallow enough, leaving the boat to Uncle Nick, and raced for the bank at top speed, holding the brail stick to the bottom as they ran.

With the frantic river tribes thus forced to shore, the water began to be wildly agitated. Long ripples shot from side to side of the rapidly diminishing space enclosed by the net, as some panic-stricken swimmer plowed his reckless way near the surface.

Even the preacher's tired and studious eyes waked with the excitement, and he tugged eagerly at the brail as the bass and pickerel began to leap, glittering in the morning sun like silver arrows shot up by the river gods.

"Look," he cried, as a two-pound bass leaped the cork line, "they are escaping."

"Plenty left," grunted Uncle Nick, who had beached the boat and was now lending his strength to the brail.

"Thar, boys, haul 'er easy," directed Counter-man. "We got 'em. They cayn't git away now. Man! hain't ther' a wad uv 'em. I know'd this wus a good hole. Cayn't fool y'ur Uncle Al on fishin' holes, don't keer if e' hain't got but one lamp, an' cayn't sling dictionary like some folks."

.

He leered around at Uncle Nick and winked—a perfectly easy thing for a one-eyed man to do—and jerked his thumb toward the preacher, who, aroused to some show of excitement over the success of the haul, was down on his knees digging into the flopping pile.

A representative from nearly every tribe of the stream was there—the swift channel cat, unprotected by armor scales, yet formidable because of the keen rapier he carries perpetually unsheathed; the aggressive and predatory game fish; the mild and timid sucker-mouths, the one forgetting their timidity, the other their rapacity in the presence of this new and unknown foe.

The good fish were dropped into the live box, the others thrown back into the river—precisely as war claims the best men and leaves the defective—and the fisherman seined on.

Several hauls had been made, none of them quite so profitable as the first, and the sun was fast mounting toward mid-sky when, as a wind-up, they prepared to drag the famous Alpine Hole that lay along the south edge of the narrow sandbar jutting far down-stream from the lower end of the island.

“This hyur’s a hard hole t’ fish,” observed

Counterman, handing the near brail to the preacher and taking his place at the oars with Jack, "but they're thar, if we can git 'em."

"Bank's purty steep," called back Uncle Nick from his place in the stern. "Better not try t' wade out none."

The preacher nodded and the other stooped to his task at the seine. It was plain that unusual results were expected from the haul by the way the two rowers bent to the oars and the extreme care with which the old man laid out the folds of the great net.

But when the usual circuit was completed and they began to haul in on the seine, it was noticed that it did not bow out in the wide curve a spread seine should. Instead, as the men pulled, the sides drew in toward each other until the floating corks stretched out into the river in nearly parallel lines.

"Hung up, by thunder," growled Counterman, scraping the sweat from his grimy forehead with a grimier forefinger. "Snag 'r somethin' about forty yards out thar—right whar the bottom's out, too, as the feller says. Must 'a' drifted in jurin' the high water. Hit werdn't thar last fall."

Jack walked up the bank a short distance to where the boat was beached. There the water lay along the steep side of the bar so deep and still and mysterious that one might almost wonder how far below the surface the bottom really lay, or what weird creatures might inhabit its slime, or what portentous secret it might hide beneath its brooding mask of greenish blackness.

Stripped to the skin, a figure that might have been a model for those master sculptors who conferred immortality upon the gods of classic Greece, he was just slipping into the water when Uncle Nick came up the bar.

"You'll find the lead line fast on somethin'—a snag more'n likely," he directed. "Jist h'ist it off. 'Tain't no trick—but we've lost our fish."

Warhope glanced back over his shoulder and nodded. The next moment he was plowing through the stream with strokes so powerful it seemed his great shoulders fairly scorned the water and spurned it out of the way. But the task ahead proved harder than the light remark of his old friend had indicated. It was only after he had three times dived to the bottom of Alpine Hole that he was able to locate the snag and release the seine.

When he swam ashore, following the seine as Uncle Nick and Counterman hauled it in, the preacher, who had come up the bar, was seated on the forward gunwale of the boat, feeling over his clothes stacked in the bow, as if eager to assure himself that they had not come to harm.

The woodsman was putting his wading clothes on again when a slight thud, as of some heavy object striking the bottom of the boat, caught his quick ear. Without turning his head—he happened to be just then squeezing the water out of his hair before putting his shirt on—he was able to catch a glimpse of the ivory butt of a six-gun protruding from a pocket of the black frock coat as it was being tucked back in the pile with the tall hat and shiny boots.

Nor was that all—with a deftness that would hardly have been expected in one of his profession, the slim fingers were feeling over the other two stacks of clothes as if making sure that the six-gun he had just tucked away was the only one in the crowd.

Still, probably such an intention was farthest from his thought. Six-gun and all, it was likely merely another of the many eccentrici-

ties of a man who had the double drawback of being a professor as well as a tenderfoot—in the eyes of the woodsman, a combination about as bad as could be made. Warhope finished putting on his clothes, and, followed by the preacher, went down the bar to where the others were busy with the seine.

CHAPTER VIII

HERMIT HOUSE-BOAT

UNCLE NICK and Counterman had just finished hauling in the seine when Jack Warhope, followed by the preacher, came down the bar and rejoined them. But the old man's prediction about losing the fish proved correct. The haul produced not a thing except a very surprised, highly indignant snapping turtle. Counterman kicked the turtle back into the water, and stared ruefully at the empty seine.

"Them fish has t' be made up"—he glanced up the river—"an thar's jist one shore place t' do it—"

"Mud Haul," Uncle Nick finished.

"Egzac'ly. Hit's sich a nasty place t' fish that it ain't hardly ever fished, but they're thar."

He stooped again over the seine and began laying it out smooth and even on the dry sand, while the woodsman, always sparing of words

and apparently in perfect agreement with the two older fishermen, went to the farther end of the great net to roll it up in readiness to be placed on the stern locker of the skiff.

The preacher had turned a quick look up the river; an expression of polite displeasure clouded his face—an expression which the others, busy with the seine, failed to notice. As a matter of fact, his part in the morning's sport had been next to negligible. After the mild and momentary excitement over the first haul, his interest had obviously waned. He held the brail stick gingerly and hugged the shore, as if his fastidious nature rebelled at the muck and grime of the task.

"Mud Haul—" he muttered; "is it far?"

"Mile 'r so," grunted Uncle Nick, as he stooped over the seine, helping spread the meshes straight.

"I really should not remain away from the study so long," the preacher pursued. "I *must* have time to collect my thoughts somewhat, as I understand I shall be expected to make a few remarks at the—festival to-night."

Uncle Nick leered around at him.

"An' them remarks *will* be few, Parson. I

'low y'u nee'n' t' worry y'ur head about them remarks none. Ther'll be another scent in the air t'-night."

The old man winked at Counterman, trudged off down the sandbar to the live box, dragged it up along the edge of the stream and hitched it to the stern of the skiff. He had hardly finished when Jack and Counterman came with the seine, coiled ready to be unwound, stacked it on the stern locker and took their places at the oars.

The preacher came last, his eyes still drawn irresistibly up the river.

"Is there not some—other place?" he asked, reluctantly taking his seat in the bow, "some—nearer place?"

Uncle Nick studied him out of his deep-set eyes. He was a guest, in a sense, and he was—the preacher. The old man's face became thoughtful; he glanced at Counterman.

"Thar's Grassy Bar," he muttered; half questioned, "an' thar's Yaller Branch—"

Counterman spit out into the river—a preliminary that usually had to be attended to before he spoke.

"Grassy Bar," he repeated thoughtfully, peering over his shoulder at the preacher in the

bow, as if he too had caught something of Uncle Nick's considerations. "Hit's better f'r spearin'. An' Yaller Branch"—he glanced up at the sun; swept sky and river with his puckered one eye—"t'-day's too glary. Hit ain't deep enough. No, I'm f'r Mud Haul. They'll be scrooched in thar thick as bees around a haw tree."

The decision seemed final. In matters of seining, and net fishing in general, nobody on the river questioned Counterman's judgment. Uncle Nick merely grunted, and proceeded to fumble his pipe and tobacco sack out of his blouse. The woodsman tightened his fingers on the oars. The preacher glanced again up the river, and pulled the faded straw hat farther down over his head as if afraid of sunburn.

"Is it dreadfully—muddy?" he mumbled.

Guest and preacher though he was, he was still a tenderfoot. Counterman's raucous laugh exposed the huge wad of tobacco between his jaws; the woodsman grinned and dropped the blade of his out-board oar into the water, Uncle Nick took the unlighted pipe from between his lips, and his roar wheeled a wisp of sand snipe that happened at the moment to be glancing up the bar.

"Not as muddy as it—sounds," he chuckled, grabbing a match out of his trousers pocket.

That settled it. The old man scraped his match on the gunwale of the boat and lighted his pipe; the oars dropped into the water, and the boat was soon glancing up along the south side of Alpine Island, the current curling in two daintily split scrolls from its prow, the live box purring along behind. The preacher, apparently resigned to whatever further hardships fate might have in store for him, sat watching the shore line, with its witchery of lapping water, its bordering fringe of pebbles and white shells, draw slowly by.

Mud Haul is merely an arm of the river that reaches up behind a bramble-infested point of mud and sand jutting out and down into the stream. Ages ago it was probably the main channel. But in the long process of earth sculpture the river shifted and the old channel degenerated into a bayou. As time went on, deposits of successive floods filled up the bayou, till at last only the lower point of it remained, fed and kept open by the tiny stream that oozed out from under the hills and crawled down through its bogs and swamps.

The fishermen landed at the sandy lower point of the prong of land behind which the mud draggled remnant of the bayou lay. The live box was hitched to a stake as before, the half reluctant preacher left to hold the brail stick, while the others rowed out and around the fifty yards or more of murky water that lay between the point and the shore.

Hardly had the circuit been completed when it began to be apparent that Counterman's judgment would be amply justified. Even the preacher forgot his half-hearted reluctance and rose to the enthusiasm of the moment. Uncle Nick beached the boat some distance up the point and hurried to his assistance.

The final haul proved to be much the best of the day. The good fish were dropped into the live box, the others tossed back into the river, and the fishermen set about preparing to return to the village. The brail sticks were united, the seine rolled up, and the woodsman walked up the bar for the boat.

He stooped over the craft, possibly recalling the circumstance of the six-gun concealed in the frock coat; laid his hand to the bow to push it off; straightened after a moment, walked some

distance farther up the bar and stood gazing intently toward the narrow upper end of the arm of water where it disappeared under the overlapping branches of trees and tangled vines. Snuggled away under the tangle, in a manner that must have made it practically invisible, except from that one point, lay a small houseboat.

A trifling circumstance enough—house-boats were common on the Wabash—but why there? The place was dark and dank, the bank boggy, and there was no spring short of Alpine Island. The woodsman turned and motioned to his companions.

They had been watching him and at his sign came trooping up the bar—the preacher fagged and lagging behind—and gathered around him. Following the direction of his finger, they peered in under the overlapping trees.

Countermander grinned around at the others after a moment and jerked his thumb back toward the skiff.

“S’posin’ we row up an’ pay ’im a visit? I’d like t’ see a man with sich an eye f’r a camp-in’ place.”

Uncle Nick tossed up his chin, grunted, and

led the way down the bar to where he had beached the boat.

The preacher appeared to be considerably vexed at the further prolongation of a trip that was growing more and more irksome to him. It might almost have been imagined that a frown ruffled the studious primness of his brow. But as the skiff glided up the narrowing arm of dead water, he appeared to get himself in hand again. The frown disappeared and his air became that of a man only mildly interested in what went on about him.

As they rowed in under the dense tangle of vines and branches they saw that the houseboat was small—small even for that class of craft.

There is little formality among men of the river and the woods—a fine enough delicacy, though, when big moments come. They brought the bow of the skiff up under the stern of the secluded little craft and climbed aboard. It was so light that it rocked with their weight.

There was both a fore and an aft door to the tiny cabin that occupied the whole mid-section of the deck, but no windows on either side. Both doors were heavily padlocked—a further proof

of the owner's exclusiveness. A narrow gangway ran along the sides of the cabin and connected the diminutive fore and after decks. 'On the dusty boards there were a number of foot-prints, some of them—curiously enough—made by a boot that must have been stylish, even dainty.

Uncle Nick leaned upon the railing of the forward deck and prodded his pipe, while the one-eyed fisherman gnawed himself a fresh chew from a sweaty plug that he clawed up out of his overalls pocket, the two of them generalizing on the circumstance of stylish boot tracks, no windows and padlocked doors.

The preacher had joined in the discussion and was just telling them, in his half bored drawl, that it might be some naturalist taking unusual pains to preserve his specimens, when Jack Warhope, still standing in the skiff and holding it to the stern of the house-boat, picked up one of the shiny boots from the preacher's stack of clothes in the bow, and, hidden from the others by the cabin, pressed the heel of it down hard beside one of the heel-prints on the dusty after deck.

The two prints coincided perfectly.

CHAPTER IX

METTLE OF THE MINISTER

THE Buckeye schoolhouse stood on the extreme west side of the village. Though it has since been replaced by a modern structure of brick and stone, seventy years ago it was a plain one-room building of the general type of the period—paint gone; weather-beaten; no belfry; no ornamentation; three windows on each side; a chimney at the back; a battered door in front.

The “festival” in celebration of the close of school was a distinct event at Buckeye. The dull building, as if rising to the spirit of the occasion, was brilliant with candles, two in each window, stuck upright on the top of the lower sash by the simple expedient of allowing some hot tallow to drip on the sash and then sticking the butt of the candle in it before it cooled.

The pupils’ desks had been removed and

placed around the walls. A long table extended across the rear. The rest of the room was clear, except for the great box stove that stood in the center of the floor, rusty red, and huge enough and deep enough to swallow a stick of cord wood whole.

Everything was free, each family that sent children to school bringing a well filled basket. And such a feast as the housewives of the neighborhood furnished forth could have been found nowhere else in the land except there in the great Flatwoods that lay, warped and wild, along the north bank of the upper Wabash.

Uncle Nick was there—which meant that things were not likely to drag, for he was the wisest, wittiest, and, as he himself said, “the no-accountest” man in the Flatwoods—a free-and-easy, happy-go-lucky, catch-as-catch-can sort of man, who had lived so far beyond his day that he no longer fitted into the social fabric.

He had been a great hunter and border ranger in his time, having come to the Wabash Country when it was still the frontier and the Indians made it dangerous. Nearly forty years before, a man in his pride and prime, he had

been one of Harrison's most trusted scouts, and had borne an honorable part in the grim and deadly struggle that took place in the early dawn upon that swamp-bound point of woodland on the Tippecanoe.

In the deep lore of the woods—the tricks of the trail; the ways of wild nature—he was probably surpassed by no man living, such knowledge belonging to a generation even then almost gone.

Aunt Liza, the “other half” of Uncle Nick, was there too. But if he had an oversupply of jollity in his disposition, she had a far greater oversupply of grimness. Aunt Liza was the one person in the world on whom Uncle Nick's wit fell flat. The sturdy erectness of her unbending figure time itself had been unable to bow or break, while the utmost the years had accomplished was to deepen the lines in her face and add a little extra touch of grimness.

In all matters pertaining to their few acres of bottom land, and in their cabin home a little way up Eagle Hollow Road, her word was law. In laying down that law, she had a way of pursuing up her lips—precisely like drawing together the mouth of a tobacco sack—and hitching them

around toward the right ear, an act that in itself bore the stamp of complete finality.

Uncle Nick was perched upon one of the desks, his back to the wall, his eyes twinkling merrily, already an interested audience around him roaring at his drollery, when Jack Warhope pushed his way through the jam of men and boys at the door and joined the aimlessly sauntering crowd in the schoolhouse. The old man saw him before his shoulders had passed the door, and called out to the group about him:

"Thar's Big Jack, the best man in the Flatwoods—don't keer if I did train 'im m'se'f—an' the hardest t' han'le. Best woodsman along the Wabash, by crackey. How I'd 'a' liked t' had 'im along with me sixty year ago! Wouldn't we 'a' made them Pottawattomies hard t' ketch—wouldn't we—lord!

"Howdy, Big Jack," he cried, reaching forth a brown hand still sinewy despite the withering years. "Jist be'n tellin' the boys about ol' Jo'l Harris. You knowed ol' Jo'l. Dern'dest cuss. Coon hunter f'om who laid the groun' chunk—an' the beatenest feller t' go bar'footed. Feet got s' thunderin' tough he could walk right through a brier patch an' never git a scratch.

"Well, I had 'im burnin' some log heaps one spring late—bar'footed, of course. 'Long in the afternoon I goes down t' see how 'e wus doin'. I see he wus limpin' some on one foot, an' I says, soon as I got clos't enough, says I, 'Jo'l, what's ailin' y'ur foot?"

"He stopped an' leant on 'is han' spike an' spit—a whoppin' gob that would 'a' drowned a bullfrog. Y'u know, Jo'l wus one o' these hyur kind that sorta f'rgits t' spit till somebody comes along an' kinda rouses 'em up like. Jist wish't y'u could 'a' seen 'im—them thin, brier proof shanks, an' them pigeon-toed, jaybird-heeled, flat feet that hadn't be'n washed sence 'e had 'em—an' 'e says, says 'e:

"'Well, Mr. Wiffles, somethin' tuck place back thar at that hic'ry log heap a spell ago that r'iled me right smart. One o' them red-hot hic'ry coals popped out an' I happened t' step on it. Well, s'r, hit made me s' *dern*' mad I jist stood on it till I put it out.'"

Uncle Nick threw his head back and laughed as loud as the rest—one of those big, hearty, broad gauge laughs—his bright eyes twinkling through the wrinkles like twin stars in a rifted sky.

While the crowd was still roaring the Reverend Caleb Hopkins arrived, as he had promised—he and Texie and Mrs. Mason. He had been anxiously awaited, since it had long been the custom to have the minister sit at the first table and launch the “festival” with a blessing.

Zeke Polick—likewise by ancient custom, a sort of self-appointed master of ceremonies—his sharp hatchet face scrubbed shiny with home-made soap perfumed with sassafras, the two tufts of whiskers bristling with importance at either corner of his bony chin, pounced on the preacher and hurried him to the head of the table, with Widow Mason on his right, Miss Martin, the teacher, on his left, and as many pupils as possible lined up along the sides of the bounteous board.

Twenty years before, Zeke’s coat, by the exercise of a nimble imagination, might have been said to fit. But Zeke had shriveled and the coat hadn’t. As he stood introducing the tall young preacher, swinging his thin arms in gestures vigorous if not eloquent, the coat cut more of a figure than Zeke. The crowd laughed—at the coat and not at the speaker. But the voluble postmaster applied the applause where it would

do the most good and seized the chance to make a full grown speech—such a speech as only a Zeke Polick *could* make with impunity in his home town.

The preacher's remarks were far shorter—simple; concise; every sentence packed with thought; every gesture alive with grace. No speaker could have asked a better audience. He had been well heralded and expectation was at keenest pitch. And no speaker ever better improved his opportunity. The speech ended while the audience was still hungry to hear more—a trick that many a less brilliant speaker might well copy. He turned back to the table and raised his hand. The two long rows of youngsters stood in awkwardly decorous expectancy. The low tones of the solemn grace fell softly impressive; the minister resumed his seat; a deep breath swept down the two rows of hungry urchins; and—the “festival” was on.

A good length of the candles in the windows had burned away when Jack, sauntering aimlessly in the crowd, found himself, for the first time that evening, face to face with Texie, where she leaned over Mrs. Mason's chair.

The girl looked up and smiled. He was

raking over his scant stock of words for one that would fit the occasion—words being about the hardest things he had to reckon with—when the young preacher, suave and affable, by odds the most popular man in the house, joined the group.

Through the mind of Jack Warhope flashed a comparison between the preacher and himself. The comparison showed dead against him. For the first time in his life he was half ashamed of his ungainly clothes, of the great limbs, the massive chest and shoulders—the “six-foot-three” of bone and brawn upon which the Flatwoods had exhausted its utmost imagination, its ultimate romance, when it bestowed the title: Big Jack.

Of a truth, the comparison between the two men could not well have been more striking. The young preacher was a very handsome man. The beard and spectacles, the mass of hair falling about his ears, seemed to invest him with an air of exquisite mystery—an air that has such power to compel the attention of women. He might have been a great tragic actor, had he turned his talents to the stage instead of to the pulpit.

The young woodsman, on the other hand, with his uncouth and ill-fitting clothes, though far from plain, owed whatever attractions he possessed to his magnificent physique, a bold regularity of features, and an honest, open frankness—a man's man.

With a jerky, elaborate bow to Jack and a light remark or two about the seining party—which he might just as well have left unsaid—the young preacher turned to Texie.

"I was just hunting for you, Miss Texie. They want you at the punch bowl."

The girl must have known the woodsman was about to speak to her. His face was as easy to read as the signs of spring. She glanced at him; dropped her eyes; laughed—a trifle uneasily he thought, knowing her so well—and walked away beside the minister.

The woodsman stood looking after them, a queer sense of emptiness in his breast—a man nursed by nature, untaught to juggle with the heart's emotions.

The voice of the gray-haired gentlewoman in the rocking chair recalled his straying thoughts.

"Aren't they a fine-looking couple?" she was saying.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I do think Texie is the *dearest* girl! She has the sweetest face, and such wonderful eyes, and so many charming and winsome ways."

"Uh-huh."

"As I look back over the years since we came to Buckeye, I remember that you and she have always been playmates. My dear husband so often used to speak of the beautiful companionship between you. Long association with one so sweet and innocent must have had a most ennobling influence upon you."

"It didn't hurt me none."

"Dear me! but you are laconic this evening, my lad. Do you always speak with such Spartan brevity?"

She might as well have said it in Latin. Jack was frowning hard in an effort to make out her meaning when Zeke Polick, officiously omnipresent, stopped at the old lady's chair.

The woodsman was saved. He walked away in the crowd, while Aunt Liza, a few seats away, never backward about airing her views, leaned over toward the postmaster's wife and in hoarse half whispers laid down her vastly positive opinion on the very subject he had just escaped discussing.

"Ain't it a burnin' shame the way Texie lets the new parson carry on with 'er, an' leavin' Big Jack out 'n the cold!—an' him wo'th any two o' the parson, the best breath 'e ever drawed. She'll rue it. Mark my words, Hanner Polick, she'll rue it. That parson hain't got all them p'laverin' ways f'r nothin'."

"Aw, shucks, Aunt Liza, you're jist jealous f'r Big Jack, him bein' about y'u s' much, an' Uncle Nick a-teachin' 'im all about the woods an' boxin' an' sich."

"Nick! Nick!"—it would be utterly impossible to commit to paper the ultimate contempt in the stifled tones—"f'r the lan' sakes! What d' y'u s'pose I care *who* the ol' man teaches 'is fool truck an' boxin' tricks to? She'll rue the day she draps a fine lad like Big Jack—bound though 'e be—an' takes up with a *teetotal* fur-riner, jist b'cayse 'e happens t' be a mite slicker-lookin' mebbe—though f'r my part I don't consait 'im one iotum better-lookin' than Big Jack is. She'll rue it, Hanner Polick, she'll rue it. That parson hain't got all that p'laver an' meechin' ways f'r nothin', now there's the business of it, I-jeeminy!"

Aunt Liza pursed up her lips—precisely like

drawing together the mouth of a tobacco sack—and hitched them, grim and forbidding, around toward the right ear, in a manner that gave her not a little the appearance of some fierce old war-hawk, ready poised.

The postmaster's wife had her lips set ready to reply when there came a sudden commotion at the door. A strange man, tall and powerfully built, a slouch hat pulled low over his head, his swart face covered by a heavy stubble of black beard, and apparently just drunk enough to be dangerous, was roughly elbowing the crowd aside as he stalked back toward the table.

"Gimme some cake," he growled.

Miss Martin, trembling on the verge of panic, passed a plate of cake to him. He snatched off a piece, held it up contemptuously for a moment and then slammed it back with a force that dashed the plate from the timid little teacher's hand and scattered its contents all about the table.

"Aw, hell, gimme some cake!"

His voice was startling in the subdued hush that had fallen on the room.

The preacher's shoulders lifted where he

stood stooped among the women around the punch bowl. A spark of anger leaped into the eyes behind the spectacles, and his fingers curled toward his palms—a movement that the others were too intent upon the intruder to notice. But the flash passed with the instant; his shoulders drooped; to his eyes came back the look of peer-ing benevolence.

“Friend,” he called, still keeping his place among the women, “do you not realize that you are intimidating these ladies and spoiling this—ah—most enjoyable evening? Will you not please—”

The swart-faced man stared insolently at the preacher, a curiously bewildered look crossed his heavy face. He seemed to study the drooping shoulders, the studious eyes behind the spectacles.

“Say, you pore devil of a gospel slinger,” he snarled, “who’s runnin’ this show? Dry up, ’r I might take a notion t’ sa’nter over and twist y’ur ear.”

Turning back to the table, he took from his pocket an ugly clasp knife and, snatching up a big cake that stood still uncut, a sort of ornamental centerpiece that had been selected for

the honor because of its size and beauty, he hacked himself off an enormous slice.

There is that about a naked knife—a certain cold, flinching thought of sharp steel drawn across warm flesh—that no other weapon inspires. Women gasped; children flew in terror to their parents; the desperado was left with the cleared center of the floor to himself.

He hacked himself off another huge section; gulped it down; laughed contemptuously, and slammed the rest of the beautiful confection at a window with a force that snuffed out a candle and shattered the glass to splinters; he glared around at the shrinking circle and smacked the knife against the palm of his hand.

“Say, ladies,” he leered, his voice sounding harsh and strident in the dead silence of the room, “you and the youngsters nee’n’ t’ git panicky. I ain’t go’n’ t’ hurt *you* none. I jist sa’nter’d in t’ git a look at a jay I’ve hear’n tell shoots up K’ntuckians.”

The reference was too plain to be misunderstood. Not a man there but had heard of the shoot-up in the post-office the evening before. Every eye turned toward Jack Warhope, standing a step or two in front of the shrinking circle

—for the others had drawn back and he had not.

The eyes of the desperado followed the eyes of the crowd. Slouching across the floor till the two stood face to face, he stiffened and glared with dull savagery.

Texie, just back of the preacher at the punch bowl, leaned across the table and almost stopped breathing.

"I'm a K'ntuckian."

"I 'low they was right sorry when y'u left."

The reply stung the drunk man to madness. With unexpected viciousness he lunged and struck with the knife.

The woodsman sprang back, warded the blow with ready quickness, and whipped a vicious jab to the chin that pitched the intruder backward to the floor. But the blow, quick as it was, had come the flick of an instant too late, the knife had found his flesh, grazed the left side of his neck, ripped through collar and tie and gashed his shoulder half-way to the armpit.

Right there the Flatwoods showed its teeth. Fifty pistols leaped into view. Al Counterman, far back in the crowd, snatched a long barreled six-gun from somewhere under his blouse

and his lanky body stiffened to balance, a light in his one eye no man there had ever seen before. Uncle Nick, with a vigor that set at defiance his weight of years, hurled younger men aside and sprang into the cleared circle.

But with so many women and children present pistols were out of the question. The desperado doubtless counted on this very fact. Stung to madness by the blow, he leaped up and lunged again with the knife.

This time he ran square into the preacher. With a readiness and courage hardly looked for in one of his cloth, he had stepped in front of Jack Warhope, his tall figure erect and superbly dominant.

Fifty flatwoodsmen, half crouched and straining forward, stood staring. The eyes of the dark-faced man stretched so wide that they appeared to bulge from their sockets. He lifted a dirty hand, brushed it across the wiry stubble of his face and, like a man half dazed, slowly shut the clasp knife and put it back in his pocket. Fifty flatwoodsmen relaxed, straightened; fifty pistols went back into hiding.

The preacher slowly raised an arm and pointed toward the open door. The desperado's

eyes dropped; he rubbed his lips together as if to loosen them; turned and stalked from the room.

A cheer that flared the candles broke from a hundred throats. As Uncle Nick remarked afterward, it was "the first time the Flatwoods ever cheered a preacher."

"Mebbe we ortn't t' let 'im git away," muttered a voice.

"Aw, leave 'im go," grunted Uncle Nick, a curiously puzzled expression on his face as he gazed at the open door through which the renegade had gone. "He's licked—an' 'e ain't wo'th hangin'."

Nobody thought of questioning the seasoned wisdom of Uncle Nick. The situation was relieved—a situation that was becoming dangerously tense.

The old man turned away, still with the puzzled expression on his face, motioned Jack to a chair at the side of the room and began examining his hurt.

At that moment Texie slipped through the crowd, some white strips of torn table-cloth in her hand, and approached the woodsman. A smile twisted his lips, and the girl, dipping one

of the strips in the cold water Aunt Liza brought, began to wash the blood from the gashed shoulder and make it ready to be bandaged.

The preacher looked on a moment, turned away and went back among the women who were gathering again about the punch bowl. The elaborate frock coat and stiff neck stock had again asserted themselves. The stoop had come back to his shoulders; the flare had left his eyes.

The girl, with fingers trembling, glanced through the open door into the square of darkness that had swallowed up the desperado; bent low over the bandages, and brought her face close to the woodsman's ear.

"Jack—he looked like—like—Ken would 'a' looked—!"

The woodsman started; looked into the square of darkness; and then into the girl's face.

"No, no!" he whispered. "Even if he was alive, he wouldn't 'a' come down that—low—!"

CHAPTER X

FANCIES AND FENCE RAILS

JACK WARHOPE made a one-handed job of his work among the feed-pens next forenoon, though it was a task for two. The young woodsman was immensely sensitive over the fact that he was a bound boy, though Simon Colin never obtruded it on him and seldom exercised any sort of authority over him. Indeed, he had practically come to let him work his own will in the management of the homestead, especially in all matters pertaining to the stock.

He allowed him to live on in the cabin where his father and mother had dreamed their dream, to come and go as he pleased. The shrewd old money-lender probably knew that the young man's high spirit would urge him further than any amount of exercised authority possibly could. And Simon Colin knew the race from which his bound boy had sprung.

Never was the judgment of the old banker better vindicated. No section of the rich Wabash bottoms gave off such crops of corn as the Warhope homestead under the boy's management; no better wheat and clover and timothy were harvested anywhere than came from its upland fields; while the cattle and hogs in the feed-lot had for the last three years topped the market, with the drovers keenly competing for the privilege of buying them. So, the old man merely chuckled as the reports came in, rubbed his bony hands, smiled in his hard dry way and let the boy have his will.

From the first, Simon's treatment of his bound boy had caused his neighbors no small wonder—it was so unlike him. He had sent him to the village school till he outgrew it, and had allowed him to roam the woods without any sort of restraint. Far from discouraging his very evident aptitude for woodcraft, he had even loosened his heart-strings—and his purse-strings; an infinitely harder thing for him to do—to the extent of buying him the best double-barreled shotgun the market afforded, and a revolver of model and workmanship as fine as the art of revolver-making could produce at that

time—two gifts on which the boy certainly cast no discredit.

When Zeke Polick, and others who knew the banker well enough to venture such liberties, had expressed surprise, the old man had merely chuckled and rubbed his bony hands together.

The morning was far gone when the woodsman finished his task at the feed-pens. The mist had left the river and the sun had worked well around into the face of Black Rock when he climbed the fence into the barn-lot, took off his hat and mopped the sweat from his face with his sleeve.

As he stood leaning against the fence, the events of the day before crossed his mind—the heelprints on the dusty deck of the concealed house-boat; the ivory handled six-gun; the spark of flint that had transformed the peering eyes of the preacher when he faced the desperado's knife. From this, his mind reverted to the words of Belden about what he had seen in the little park.

A face rose before him—a face compelling in its easy suavity—that, in spite of its studious severity, seemed to have a strange fascination for Texie. He knew she had let him walk home

with her from the festival—a privilege that meant more in the Flatwoods than anywhere else in the world. A deep breath came up out of his breast; his hand gripped the fence rail hard.

But many an insistent task lay waiting. The thought roused him. As he raised his arm to put on his hat, the sweat got at the cut in his shoulder and stung him.

He had intended to haul in some shock corn from the bottoms. He frowned toward the wagon; plucked the blouse loose about his shoulder; finally went up into the woods to inspect a string of rail fence that would have to be repaired before the stock cattle could be turned out of the lower lots into the upland pasture.

He had spent some time readjusting fallen rails and straightening crooked panels when a tiny spot of color in a corner of the fence caught his eye. For some reason it arrested his instant attention. In a moment he was down on his knees parting the weeds and tangled brambles where a yellow orchid had just unfolded the mysteries of its enchanted slipper to the sun.

He rose to his feet after a time, but stood gazing down at the flower—a spot of gold in its mean setting.

A fox squirrel came zigzagging along the top rail of the fence. A blue jay darted down at him with a strident scream and struck with all his might of beak and claw—there is perpetual war in the woods, and no wild creature ever strikes with anything less than his utmost might. The chance to strike again may never come.

The squirrel leaped to an overhanging branch, the blue jay perched on the one just above, and the two noisiest denizens of the woods proceeded to air their grievance—very much like two angry neighbors quarreling over the back fence.

The raucous wood-note roused the man. He looked up and watched the quarrel, none better able to read its meaning—the woods were awake; every tree a home; every neighbor jealous of encroachment. The instant he moved the quarrel ceased, both bird and beast forgetting their grievance in the presence of a common foe.

He glanced down at the flower again, broke back the weeds and brambles from about it with the toe of his boot, turned away and went on with his task.

Stopping a few minutes later to ease his shoulder a bit, he happened to glance over the fence into the woods. The act was purely involuntary, but a sight met his eyes that instantly drove every other consideration out of mind—from behind a log a man was glowering at him.

He ducked out of sight in a flash, and the woodsman stooped to his task—carelessly; without so much as the flick of an eye to betray that he had seen anything at all—but he had caught a distinct view of a slouch hat, a rough flannel shirt, open at the collar, the glare of dark eyes that smoldered in a face dark and scowling and covered with a stubble of black beard—the desperado of the festival.

Texie's startled whisper, as she had fastened the bandages about his shoulder the evening before, flashed across his thought. The face behind the log and the face of his memory rose to his mind as distinct as a reflection in Whispering Spring. Unbelievable though it was—against all reason in the light of that terrible letter—he saw the resemblance she had fancied—vague, half intangible, but none the less a resemblance.

Still, he reflected, a calmer moment succeed-

ing the first start of surprise, resemblance though there was, it was by no means conclusive. There was a river pilot on the Wabash that greatly resembled a horse-trader in Buckeye, and there was not even the remotest kinship between them.

With the tail of his eye on the log, the woodsman went on with his work, apparently absorbed in it, really with no other thought than to put as great a length of fence row as possible between himself and that scowling face, and in as short a time as was prudent.

The moment he thought himself out of sight, he took out a rail of the fence, crawled through the opening and, with every caution known to woodcraft, crept back through the underbrush toward the log. The broken outline of it at last came into view through a clump of hazel. He raised his head ever so little and lay listening. Not a false note disturbed the soft purr of nature; the pulse of the woods beat normal. He dropped his head; crawled up to the log. The leaves were flattened and still warm, but the man was gone.

He searched the moss and leaves until he found the trail—the scrape of a boot in a spot

of moist ground at the foot of an oak. After that it was easy. There were two sets of tracks. To his surprise one set led back toward the cliffs above the homestead. He followed it. At a point along the buffs that commanded the nearest view of the cabin under the crimson Rambler the mussed leaves and broken weeds beneath a clump of bushes at the very brink of the rocks showed where the renegade had concealed himself, if such had been his intention, from any chance observer below. Three half burned matches, with which he had probably lighted his pipe, indicated that he had remained some time.

Jack hunted until he found the pipe ashes—a refinement of woodcraft that would probably have brought a chuckle of satisfaction from his old friend and mentor, Uncle Nick—glanced down at the tiny cabin, the barn-lot, turned and followed the trail back under the trees.

Past the log it led, away to the north, down the face of the wooded bluff and into the narrow road that threaded Eagle Hollow. He followed it within sight of the rude hovel at the head of the hollow into which Loge Belden and his sister had lately moved; stopped; studied

the place critically for a moment; finally turned, climbed the bluff and, with an uncomfortable feeling of hidden eyes upon him, returned to his task at the fence.

The forenoon was gone by the time he finished it. As he trudged back, the corner where he had found the yellow orchid drew his eye irresistibly.

Raking away the dead leaves he dug it up, being careful to leave enough soil about the roots to prevent their withering, and carried it in his hands out through the trees and up among the tumbled ramparts of Black Rock.

In the tiny flower bed at the foot of the sandstone pinnacle where the three names were carved, he hollowed out a place in the rich leaf-mold and set the orchid with the others—all of them doubtless having come there at different times in the same way; rose to his feet and stood deeply pondering, as his gaze rested on the three names carved in the rock. That baffling resemblance, in spite of him, *would* creep back into his thought.

Before him, more than half a mile to the south, wound the graceful river, rimming with silver the level stretches of rich bottom land.

Conforming somewhat closely to the old Indian trail that skirted the cliffs along the north bank of the Wabash, the River Road paralleled the fence enclosing the barn-lot and fallow yard; widened at the gate beneath the big elm; wound away under the sycamores and maples until lost to view in the sleepy village, squatted in the mouth of Eagle Hollow just where the river crooks sharply in nearer the bluffs.

Less than half-way to the village—so near that, from his commanding stand upon the rocks, Jack could look down into the yard—the white walls and comfortable porch of the red-roofed cottage in its setting of park-like orchard and well-kept grounds, made an inviting picture among the trees. It was the one luxury the old banker had allowed his starved life, and on it he had spent infinite pains.

Almost under his very feet droned the flocks of the barnyard. The cattle stood chewing drowsily or lolling in lazy repose. Fields and woods lay shimmering. Away down below him, over across the road and out in the clover field, a meadow-lark, the one truly live spot on the landscape, rose from the stubble and went boring his way up into the genial day, spiral after

spiral, singing the while a glad wild song, until, his wings aweary, his song ended, he set his pinions and floated gracefully down to join the mate whose favor the song was doubtless intended to win.

Among the truant sprays of the crimson Rambler a wren hopped about in his quick, nervous way chirping the sweet elusive notes that were doubtless intended for the ear of another nature mate, shy and tiny, snuggled away safe in some protected crevice of the cabin.

Far across the bottoms, a sand-hill crane beat his labored way up the river.

A chance breeze swept down out of the woods, as if the drowsy trees had suddenly waked and expanded their lungs. It slipped over the rim of the cliff; creaked the stark skeleton of the unfinished farm-house and ruffled the plant sprays of the crimson Rambler.

The bold frankness of the man's face settled to a deeper thoughtfulness; he looked down at the new orchid among the old, fresh and piquant as when he dug it out of the fence corner; glanced toward the red-roofed cottage, and set his feet to the rough path that led down to the fallow yard.

CHAPTER XI

THE FAIRY'S SECRET

THE furnishings of the cabin under the crimson Rambler would have been a revelation to a stranger entering the door for the first time. A soft-toned rug from the Orient covered three-fourths of the rough floor, stopping just short of the cook stove, which, with its array of utensils, occupied the other fourth. The bed was high posted and canopied, dressed in the finest linen and hung with faded tapestry. The chairs were handsomely upholstered, while a center table of hand carved rosewood stood in the mid-section of the floor.

Along the south wall an American flag of silk hung draped, and under its lopped-up center two pictures—the beautiful face of a woman; and in the companion frame, the fine, upstanding figure of a soldier in the uniform of a Colonel of Mounted Rangers—the man and

the woman who had dreamed the dream that never came true.

It is a secret past finding out how the woodsman, in the nine years he had lived alone, had managed to keep the cabin in such order, a secret known only to himself and—but that's the secret. The cooking utensils showed the wear and batter of unskilled hands, of course, but otherwise the place was almost as neat and quite as clean as the day his mother had left it.

He had finished his task at the barn and feed-pens that evening and returned to the cabin, where, deeply thoughtful, he was half mechanically building a fire in the cook stove when his quick ear caught the sound of a light step coming along the path from the orchard. He laid down the kindling and turned toward the door.

The light step had stopped, and Texie stood outlined in the doorway, her eyes dancing alive over the thought of having taken the alert woodsman by surprise, the round wonder of her throat and cheeks touched to a softer blush by the waning sunlight that slipped in under the crimson Rambler.

The man dragged off his hat. The girl glanced over the cabin; lifted her eyes

"Jack, you're the best housekeeper in the Flatwoods."

The floor creaked with the weight of him as he came to the door. He had to stoop to pass under the lintel, and his massive shoulders spread almost from jamb to jamb.

"It ain't me," he said in his slow way. "There's a wonderful fairy about these hills som'er's that slips in when I'm off in the fields, and no matter how upside down I've left things, she jist touches 'em with them small hands fairies has got, 'r mebbe says 'r sings some wonderful charm to 'em, and when I come back, there they are, all spick and span. And that same fairy brings me the most wonderful pies and cakes and baked meats! Some folks says ther' ain't no fairies, but I know ther' is—one, anyhow."

The girl's expressive face was alive and eager.

"Why don't y'u try some day t'—trap your—fairy?"

The heart of the big woodsman rose to his eyes. For a transcendent moment the man in him, sprung from generations of soldiers and gentlemen, supremely dominated the bound boy. He drank in the wonder of her hair, the

plump soft mystery of her throat and bosom, and his hands instinctively reached toward her.

"I'd give the world—!"

He stopped; the transcendent moment passed. He dropped his eyes and crushed his hat rim in his powerful fingers.

The girl bent her head and a deep thoughtfulness filmed the brown of her eyes.

A king cardinal flamed down out of the woods, dropped in among the top branches of a tall hickory near the unfinished farm-house and set the evening athrill with a wild flood of master melody. The bold spell of it reached the man. He slowly raised his eyes and found those of the girl on him.

"Jack—!"

He felt the slight tremor in her voice and half guessed what was coming.

"That face las' night—it ha'nts me—"

Involuntarily he glanced up at the high brink of the cliff where, under a clump of bushes, lay some mussed leaves and a pinch of pipe ashes.

"Don't let it," was his slow answer. "There's the pilot of the *Obenchain*, now, looks a pow'rful sight like Lark Sharp, and they ain't a mite of kin in the world."

She pondered the answer and seemed much impressed, even relieved, as he fancied.

"How's Pap Simon t'-day?"

The girl glanced across the orchard to the red-roofed cottage.

"Pore father! He ain't hardly left the house sence that—night. He's wrote and wrote, and looked at papers in 'is safe I didn't know 'e had, and this afternoon he had Zeke Polick up with his notary public seal." A shadow flitted across her face. She laced her smooth fingers; gripped them. "That—terrible letter! He's read it and read it. Pore Ken—!"

The man reached his arm up over the door; absently felt a spray of rose vine, its buds swollen big with the mystery that was soon to be revealed. The girl glanced at the hand among the rose-buds and slowly turned to the frank and thoughtful face.

"That's why I come—Daddy wants t' see y'u."

"Me?"

"He wants y'u t' come over a minute."

"Y'u didn't tell 'im nothin' about that—that—face?"

The girl's eyes flinched at the question.

"No,—only that you got—hurt."

She drew a step nearer, laid her fingers lightly upon the sleeve of his blouse.

"How *is* y'ur shoulder?"

He fumbled the side of his open collar.

"Aw, it ain't nothin'."

"Didn't I know y'u'd say that."

"Honest."

The smile came back and brought the dimples.

"Jack—"

He stole a quick look at the side of her upturned face and waited. He knew no answer was expected.

"I be'n s' pinin' hungry all day somehow f'r the rocks and woods—they're all waked up and wonderful now—and—"

She paused. The man drank in the exquisite profile of her fresh young face, her lips parted, her eyes softly retrospective with the smile that nestled in them. She raised her hand, the fingers half opened, and swept it along the timber line.

"I 'lowed mebbe y'u wouldn't mind takin' me up there, bein' y'ur shoulder ain't—well."

"Wouldn't *mind* takin' y'u—!" The man seemed to grope for a word big enough to finish the thought. "W'y—I'd—I'd—we'll be startin'

the minute we can run over and see what Pap Simon wants—b'fore, if y'u say so."

"No, I reckon we better go t' father first, he's be'n that fussed and restless sence—"

She turned and took a thoughtful step toward the path that led across the orchard to the red-roofed cottage.

The man followed, suddenly stopped, raised a quick glance up to the wild and tumbled pinnacles of the cliff, and hurried back to the cabin. The girl followed him as far as the door, where she stood mildly wondering to see him take down the beautifully modeled revolver—the gift of her father—from where it hung on a peg behind the cook stove, carefully examine it and buckle it on under his blouse.

CHAPTER XII

LADY SLIPPER DAY

JACK WARHOPE was startled at the change the three days had wrought in the banker. He was in a big arm-chair in the sitting-room when they came in, with business papers lying about him on the floor. The lines of his craggy face had noticeably deepened.

Texie ran to him and knelt by the chair. He laid a great gaunt hand on her head, and after a time looked up at the woodsman, standing so tall and strong in the floor that he seemed almost out of place in so small a room.

"I'm hearin' they clawed y'u up las' night."

The woodsman grinned; the old man went on:

"Didn't hurt y'u, did they—much?"

"A cat scratch."

The old man's fingers strayed over the girl's hair.

"Jack."

"Yes, sir."

"You've be'n a good boy and you've worked hard." The woodsman shifted to his other foot and glanced down at the bright hair of the girl. The old banker studied him, slowly. "I never noticed it b'fore how much y'u look—and act—like y'ur father."

The woodsman gripped his hat brim hard. It was the first time the old man had ever let fall a word about the gallant soldier who had dreamed the dream that never came true. The girl raised her eyes to her father's face.

"Size and looks and—actions, you're—like him," the old man went on. "Of all the men I ever knowed, I think he was the noblest, and—the finest gentleman. A soldier every inch, but no business man. That's why—"

He stopped abruptly, took his hand from his daughter's head and dropped it to her shoulder. His deep set eyes strayed away—perhaps into the past, with its memories.

He looked up after a time, in his quick penetrating way.

"How's the cattle?"

The question was so at variance with the thoughts in the woodsman's mind that he was slow in answering.

"Fine, sir."

"About ready t' market?"

"Most any day, now. Three drovers have be'n t' see 'em a'ready."

"Sell 'em—as soon as y'u please. What'll they bring?"

"If the market holds, they ough' t' top five thousan'."

"Five thousan'—that's a heap o' money."

The bony fingers drummed hard upon the chair-arm. The old man fidgeted in his seat in a way that seemed to indicate that the interview was over. The girl rose.

"Father, we're goin' up in the woods t' see the sun set—Jack and me—"

A statement that was half question. The old man did not look up. The drumming on the chair-arm neither slackened nor increased. They were at the door of the dining-room, the woodsman standing aside to let the girl pass, when the banker turned in his chair.

"Jack."

The girl stopped; the man turned back.

"Texie tells me you're leavin' us as soon as you're twenty-one."

"I'm aimin' to, sir."

"And that'll be—?"

"The twentieth—seven more days."

"Seven days—!" The old man frowned; rasped his hand over the dry stubble on his bony chin. "Well, seven days is—seven days," he muttered. "Hit ain't b'cause I've be'n hard on y'u, is it?"

The woodsman came a step back into the sitting-room.

"No, sir, it ain't that. You've be'n s' good to me that it makes it hard t' go, but I got t' do somethin' f'r m'self—now."

The old man bent his brows thoughtfully; nodded toward his daughter in the door of the dining-room.

"She says you're calc'latin' t' jine a wagon train f'r California."

"Yes, sir, that's what I'm aimin' t' do, if you're still minded t' give me Graylock when my time's out."

He stopped. Something in the keen old eyes searching him impelled him to go on.

"I'm aimin' t' pick up enough—gold out there t' come back and buy the homestead, if you'll sell it t' me, and make my father's—and mother's—dream come true."

The old man dropped his eyes and drew his hand across his shaggy brows.

"The day you're—twenty-one"—his voice was strained, and he seemed to weigh each word before letting it fall—"we'll have a long talk, you and me, b'fore y'u jine that wagon train—"

He stooped forward, picked up a bundle of papers from the floor and began sorting them over.

The others passed out through the kitchen, where Mrs. Curry was busy about the cook stove, back along the orchard path, across the corner of the fallow yard, and up the broken passes of the cliff.

The witchery of the coming sunset was astir among the splintered peaks and pinnacles of the bold headland. Cliff and glen and winding stream came out in the mellow light and paraded their thousand charms. The woodsman took off his hat, swept his eyes over the far-spread landscape, drank deep the wonder of it, slowly turned to his companion.

The zest of the steep climb had brought an added dash of color to her face; livened the winsome wonder of her eyes. He allowed himself to revel for a delicious moment in the rich com-

pleteness of her, as she stood lightly poised on the rock.

She seemed to feel his eyes on her, and let her gaze stray back up the river, along its winding headlands to his face. It was kindled with the same immense emotion that had transfigured it a few minutes before in front of the little cabin under the crimson Rambler—the man in him again dominated the bound boy.

His arm unconsciously stole toward her; but he drew it back and pointed to the tiny flower bed at the foot of the upstanding pinnacle. The girl followed the motion, softly clapped her hands and stood looking down at the yellow orchid, its golden slipper still as plump and unwilted as before it had been transplanted.

“I found it this morning back in the woods.”

His voice was strained and heavy out of all proportion to what might have been expected in uttering a statement so simple. The girl breathed fast. The man stooped, plucked the blossom from the stem and held it toward her; she took it and with slow fingers fastened it in her belt.

“I reckon we wasn’t nothin’ but jist crazy kids,” the man went on, “but y’u know how the

first blue bird and the first robin and the first lady slipper was alw'ys—big days to us—”

He was venturing his words forth as if each one had to feel its way across his lips, like a hunter picking his way over the dangerous bog at the head of Mud Haul.

“But lady slipper day,” he faltered on, “was alw'ys the biggest. Y'u know, we alw'ys kinda fig'r'd on doin' somethin'—extra that day, and when it come this year I be'n plannin' I'd—I'd—”

He paused, breathed hard, struggled for the next words—the hardest in the language to say; stole a glance at the girl's face; looked away. The stark skeleton of the unfinished farm-house unexpectedly—mayhap unluckily—came under his eyes; the transfiguring emotion slowly died in his face; the bound boy again dominated the man.

The shadows of a far spent day were falling upon the woods. The red remnant of sun speared its slanting rays into the forest in bars of dancing crimson—long lances of yellow bronze that the pulsing twigs shivered into twinkling splinters and flung in rippling halos

against the west faces of the trees. One dancing bar, glancing from the face of the upstanding pinnacle, had seized the high privilege to find out the girl's brown hair and sprinkle it with gold.

He felt her hand upon his arm, and followed her eyes back to the compelling wonder of the mellow landscape.

The fair countryside lay at their feet. The sun just cleared the trees that bearded the hills beyond the bend in the river. Where it struck the water it seemed to heap it up into a long swath of burnished gold—only infinitely more ethereal than gold could ever be.

A solitary boatman crossed this scintillating swath and threw it into quivering undulations that made their eyes wince. Above the roofs of the village the smoke curled lazily from many a kitchen chimney; crows floundered in tired procession up the valley; some pigeons, as if bent solely on giving an exhibition of fancy flying, pitched high above hill and housetop on wings that showed resplendent when they crossed the face of the sun.

In the pulsing stillness of the serene evening they watched the great red disk of day, now

enormously magnified by comparison with terrestrial objects, as it sank lower and lower into the teeth of the tree-crowned hills. Moment by moment the trees bite deeper—a frayed and ragged scar. Less than half the glowing circle is left; now only a small segment—but regal, splendid still. There!—it is gone—but trailed by a resplendent afterglow that illumines the rim of the west like the memory of an unselfish life.

He heard the girl's deep breath; felt her hand thrill upon his arm; accepted it for what it was—the spontaneous communion of comradeship, a relation on which he dared not presume—dimly read in the serious eyes, as they strayed over his face, the tingling mystery, the far-flung vision that nestled there.

The breeze that evening always brings to the top of Black Rock loosened a strand of her hair and blew it about her face. She lifted a hand, and tucked the errant lock back into place.

Very thoughtful she seemed, and for the most part silent—the all sufficient silence that sometimes falls between comrades—as he led her down the bluffs, on the Eagle Hollow side, around by the post-office, and to the yard gate at the red-roofed cottage.

The Reverend Caleb Hopkins, with a book under his arm, was just coming across the little park from the study at the parsonage. He dropped down on the rustic seat at Whispering Spring, opened the book and humped himself over it, apparently oblivious to all that went on about him.

The woodsman studied him a moment, frowned, and turned his eyes back to the girl. Swept by a sudden impulse that he could not control—an impulse that called for no word—he lifted her hand from the gate latch; held it for a delicious instant in both his own; dropped it and turned away.

Half-way up the road to the big elm at the homestead he looked back. The tall figure of the young preacher had risen from the rustic seat at Whispering Spring, and through the pensive twilight the girl was crossing the yard toward him.

CHAPTER XIII

BATS AND BEETLES

IN THE infinite louvre of nature hangs no finer masterpiece than a May day. A man and a maid—the ultimate word in creation; for whom the sunsets are hung, the waters spread—had stood among the splintered pinnacles of Black Rock and watched the final strokes laid on that finished such a masterpiece; had watched the Artist draw the curtains of His majestic studio and pass on to other studies beyond the rim of the west.

In the luminous evening that followed Uncle Nick sat smoking a quiet pipe on the porch of his modest cabin at the upper edge of the village, almost exactly opposite the point where the Eagle Hollow Road crossed the flat, unbanistered bridge and turned up the east bank of the branch to disappear between the jaws of the hollow.

Through the open door came the clink of the supper dishes as Aunt Liza put them away. A throng of bats, nocturnal hunters all, darted in and out among the fruit trees, white with bloom; the drone of a thousand beetles, the hum of a myriad gauzy wings, throbbed the silence into a sort of drowsy rhythm—a scene tranquil and serene.

The old man rose from the edge of the floor where he had been sitting, stretched and knocked the ashes from his finished pipe. He was just setting off to keep his tacitly understood appointment with the embryo scientists, soldiers and statesmen who assembled nightly around the barrels and boxes of Zeke Polick's store, when the front gate clicked. He stopped and stood mildly wondering to see the tall and lanky form of Al Countermand, the one-eyed fisherman, coming up through the trees.

He threw up his hand, the fisherman threw up his. Two grins met and passed in the twilight.

"Fine day," said the fisherman.

The old man lifted his eyes and swept them around the sky-line to the still faintly purple west.

"Couldn't make one no better, if I had the tools."

Countermand's frisky eye twinkled and he laughed. Folks had somehow got the habit of laughing at almost everything Uncle Nick said. It's a hardship that humorists have to put up with.

The fisherman seldom—almost never—came into that part of the village. With the sound horse sense that eighty years of hard knocks had pounded into him, Uncle Nick knew that something unusual had brought him. Countermand knew that he knew. He absently traced the flight of the bats with his puckered eye and shifted from one foot to the other.

"Little out o' y'ur range, hain't y'u?"

The fisherman sat down on the porch, spit out into the yard, away out—it was a fair wonder that any man *could* spit so far and scatter so little—and threw away his cud, as if clearing his mouth for action. Al rarely threw away his cud. When he did it meant something.

"Whar's Aunt Liza?"

"Back in the kitchen. Why?"

The other did not answer, but sat listening to the clink of the dishes. He finally lifted his bat-

tered hat, ran his fingers up through his hair and motioned his aged friend to sit beside him.

"Seen Big Jack t'-day?"

Uncle Nick fumbled out his pipe; put it back.

"See'd 'im this evenin' late come down off'n Black Rock"—he tossed up his hand toward the high battlement of stone that frowned down upon them from across the mouth of the hollow—"him an' Texie. They crossed the branch at the bridge thar, passed the gate an' went on down through town—t' the post-office, I 'low."

The fisherman put his hat back on.

"I'm skeer'd it's dern' little good it'll do 'im. As I come along up the crick, I happened t' glance down in ol' Sime's orch'id, an' thar she set with the new parson at Whisperin' Spring."

The old man lowered his eyes and sat patting his boot upon the gravel of the small gutter worn by the drip from the porch eaves.

"Beats the devil the headway the parson's a-makin' with 'er," he muttered. "Must know some trick other men ain't on to."

He lifted his face after a moment and chuckled complaisantly.

"Big Jack," he went on, "couldn't kill him with a nigger maul. Didn't 'e fetch that chuckle

head a groanin' lick? Lord! Leetle too high, though," he commented in the nice criticism of a man who, in his day, was known to have been the most dangerous rough and tumble fighter on the border.

He paused, and his face assumed the same puzzled expression it had worn at the festival the evening before.

"I reckon hit couldn't 'a' be'n, an' it's jist as well not t' say nothin' about it," he went on, "but I thought that feller favored that scape-gal'us of ol' Sime's, Ken Colin—what 'e would 'a' be'n by now. I noticed it when 'e flared up off'n the floor thar with the knife."

Counterman leaned nearer.

"That's jist what I mosey'd up t' talk about." He lowered his voice. "That wus Black Bogus."

Uncle Nick straightened.

"No!"

"Hit were."

The old man swore, took out his pipe again, stared at it and put it back in his pocket.

"Black Bogus—hit couldn't—w'y, ther's fifty sheriffs a-lookin' f'r him."

"Yes, an' them same fifty sheriffs ain't none too dern'd anxious t' find 'im. He's a *bad* man

with a six-gun. He may *be* Ken Colin—that I don't know—but I *do* know he's Black Bogus. I run afoul of 'im three year back, down Vincennes way. It wus when—"

The fisherman stopped, breathed hard, passed his hand up over his sunken eye socket and sat staring out into the gathering night. The aged hunter studied him covertly. More than once he had thought of asking for the story of that lost eye, but the innate delicacy of the born woodsman had restrained him.

"Calc'late you wus some su'prised when 'e swarmed in?"

Counterman turned; felt along the edge of the porch floor with his hands.

"I 'low I werdn't no worse su'prised than he'd 'a' be'n if he'd 'a' saw me. But I happened t' be back in the corner b'hind the crowd—an' it's a good thing I were. I dasn't come face t' face with Black Bogus. He tricked me once; he won't trick me no more"—the old hunter saw the weather-stained fist of the fisherman grip tight; heard his lanky jaws clamp together; watched him instinctively hitch the holster of his long barreled six-gun to an easier position at his hip—"an' I've already got enough blood on my hands over—"

He stopped abruptly and again sat staring into the night.

The man was a mystery. He had come to Buckeye as the driftwood comes—nobody knew from where. He paid his way, asked no questions, answered none. In the silence that fell Uncle Nick sat pondering him—what his life story might have been.

The fisherman roused himself after a moment and went on.

“What crosses my path is, how ’e come t’ be there, p’tic’lar how ’e happened t’ come out s’ bold—’specially if ’e *is* the man you think ’e is. It ain’t his way. He never would ’a’ done it if it hadn’t ’a’ be’n f’r Zeke Polick’s squir’l whisky.” He straightened, glanced around at his aged friend, and, had the light been sufficient, the old man might have seen that the twinkle, never long absent from the doubly capable eye, had returned. “Big Jack an’ the parson shore did show ’im a good time—while ’e lasted.”

Uncle Nick grinned.

“That parson—lord! I ain’t be’n t’ church in fifty year, but I’m calc’latin’ on goin’ next Sunday. If that parson can outface the devil the way

he outfaced that hulkin' chuckle head, he ain't no bad man t' hitch up with."

"I'm only hopin'," Counterman went on, "Big Jack—an' the parson, too, f'r that matter—has seen the last o' Black Bogus. I'm hopin', but I'm doubtin'."

"I ain't, nary a doubt," Uncle Nick chuckled. "Your Black Bogus"—the puzzled expression touched his face again—"got a bellyful las' night. He ain't honein' f'r no more, I'm bettin' m' bottom dollar 'e ain't."

"I dunno," Counterman pursued. "He's a bad lot. Ther' ain't a worse man the length o' the Wabash. An' then there's Loge Belden they say moved in the ol' cabin up Eagle Holler last week with 'is sister.

"Cord wood—huh—he ain't no more a wood chopper than I be. He's a river man. Come f'om the K'ntucky mountains in the first place, an' use'n t' be a pearl fisher till they run 'im off'n the river. I never knowed Loge, that is, what y'u might say pers'n'ly. I never see'd 'im till 'e tangled with Big Jack in the post-office t' other evenin', but I knowed 'is sister, not the one that's with 'im now but the—other one—the one that's—dead—"

The fisherman bent his head and his voice fell low, finally stopped.

"Black Bogus is an old pal of Loge's," he went on after a time. "Wouldn't wonder he's harborin' up thar, an' if 'e is, why is 'e? An' what are they both—'r either one of 'em—doin' up hyur in the Flatwoods? Hit looks t' me"—he bent toward his companion—"they've got the'r eye on ol' Sime Colin."

Uncle Nick twisted half around on the edge of the porch floor, felt for his pipe, let it be, sat thoughtfully fumbling his chin.

"That'd leave Ken out," he mused. "He wouldn't 'a' fell that low. Anyhow, ther's lots o' folks that looks like other folks."

He leaned back against a porch post, as if relieved to be quit of a thought that had puzzled him no little. Countermand thought a moment before he spoke again.

"Black Bogus's game is counterf'itin', but he's got the guts f'r anything; an' Loge's or'n'ry enough f'r any dirt. Ther' ain't nothin' I'd put a-past 'im. He's done time twice't a'ready, an' would be doin' it right now if it werdn't f'r 'is sister. Thar's one good gal—as different f'om Loge as the devil f'om Sund'y. Hit's Loge's one good p'int—he thinks a heap of 'is sister."

"Well," commented Uncle Nick with his slow drawl, as the other paused, "hit might be the makin' of ol' Sime if somebody *could* manage t' pry a dollar 'r two off'n 'im, an' as f'r Big Jack, I 'low ther' ain't *none* of 'em honein' f'r no more truck with him."

He chuckled complaisantly, possibly fancying that he had put a particularly neat and unanswerable finish to the argument.

"That ain't it," Countermand pursued, "Black Bogus an' Loge are both the kind that strikes in the dark."

"Thunder!"

Uncle Nick's shoulder jerked away from the porch post, and the fisherman caught the glitter of his deep-set eyes in the twilight.

"They cayn't come nothin' like that on the boy 'r I'll strike the war path m'self. Dunno but what I'll peel an eye on that cabin up the crick."

The old ranger sat erect and restless, drumming with his fingers on the porch floor and looking away across the narrow mouth of Eagle Hollow to where Black Rock poked his tumbled ramparts up against the eastern sky.

The clatter in the kitchen ceased, Aunt Liza's still sprightly, vastly positive step came across

the cabin floor, and a moment later the creak of her rocking chair joined the droning chorus of the beetles.

"Wonder what Big Jack thinks o' the way the parson's a-cuttin' around 'is gal?" Counterman mused.—"An' her the best prize in the Flatwoods, even if she didn't have a cent."

Uncle Nick fumbled out his pipe again, knocked it on the edge of the porch floor, and filled and lit it.

"I knowed 'is father, Colonel David Warhope, when 'e first come t' the Flatwoods up'rds of eighteen years back, an' I knowed 'is gran'-father, ol' Colonel David Warhope. I fit Tecumseh an' the Prophet under the gran'-father. The homestead wus a present t' him f'om General Andrew Jackson. Ol' Colonel David an' young Colonel David, they wus both fine, upstandin' men, soldiers every inch, an' Big Jack's like 'em. Hit's too bad the homestead had t' be lost t' ol' Sime, an' the boy bound out to 'im. But even so, he'd make a heap sight more fittin' man f'r a Flatwoods gal than that hump-backed, squinty-eyed parson. Beats the devil the headway he's a-makin' with 'er. I wouldn't 'a' thought—"

"No good'll come of it," broke in the acid tones of Aunt Liza from where she sat rocking just inside the cabin door, her erect prim figure dimly outlined against the deeper darkness of the indoors, her iron-gray head nodding in vigorous emphasis. "Didn't y'u see 'is carryin's on with 'er at the sociable las' night? Big Jack ain't go'n' t' be a bound boy f'rever. She'll rue the day she draps a fine lad like him an' takes up with a furriner."

"Aw, Liza," drawled Uncle Nick, "the parson ain't no furriner, he's a college pr'fessor."

"Don't talk t' *me*," snapped the tart voice. "I reckon I know what I see with m' own eyes. Mind what I tell y'u, she'll rue it, an' so'll Sime Colin a-lettin' 'im harbor around like that, don't keer if 'e *did* go t' school with Ken."

"I bet y'u if 'er mother wus livin' ther' wouldn't be no sich goin's-on. That parson's intirely too gallantin'. He ain't got all them meechin' ways f'r nothin'. I dunno what ol' Sime can be thinkin' about—nothin' but money hoardin' an' lan' grabbin', I reckon. If I had a gal, I'd no more think o' lettin' 'er be harbored up with a *teetotal* furriner that-a-way—huh—I'd no more *think* o' lettin' 'er than I'd think o' tak-

in' wings an' flyin' t' England. There ain't no sense—"

"Aw, don't be *too* hard on the parson," interrupted Uncle Nick with a chuckle, "I reckon 'e won't *eat* 'er."

"Huh!" snorted the voice, in ultimate contempt. "What d' *you* know about raisin' gals. Cayn't see an inch ahead o' y'ur nose. Hyur we set, in our old age, bar'ly able t' keep soul an' body t'gether, when we might 'a' tuck our pick an' choice—an' me a dingin' it into y'u f'om daylight t' dark jist how it'd be, too."

"Oh, well, Liza," the old man rejoined, in tones more serious, "don't throw it up to a man b'cayse 'is foresight ain't as good as 'is hin'sight. You might 'a' done worse. I hain't never be'n in jail yit, an' you hain't never be'n in the pore-house."

The dim figure rocked a while in silence.

"Gals is gittin' e'en a'most too highfalutin' these days," she resumed, though in a milder voice. "Bound 'r free, Big Jack's a-plenty good enough f'r Texie Colin, the best breath she ever drewed, with *all* 'er money an' good looks.

"Use'n t' be a gal could git along with *one* beau, but now'days—huh—they ain't sadsified

'less'n they've got two 'r three a-traipsin' after 'em. Things is comin' to a purty pass—that's what I say—to a purty pass. If a gal ain't sadisfied with one *beau* at a time, how in the name o' sense can y'u expect 'er t' be sadisfied with one *husban'* at a time?—now there's the business of it, I-jeeminy!"

The air of hard finality with which the grim lips were pursed up and twisted around toward the right ear, the crisp positiveness with which the words were uttered, almost made the twilight seem to crackle, like stiff parchment being folded after the reading of some weighty mandate.

Countermand dropped an arm across his knee and sat very still, as if afraid the slightest sound might touch off again that hair-trigger tongue; Uncle Nick looked away toward Black Rock; the bats darted about in the dim half light, intrepidly threading the bewildering labyrinth of fruit trees; beetles droned their monotonous chorus; gauzy wings pulsed the night with their drowsy rhythm; a cricket at the corner of the porch tried to match the creak of Aunt Liza's rocking chair.

CHAPTER XIV

WARNING OF THE FROGS

WHILE the cricket carried on his squeaking contest with Aunt Liza's rocking chair, Jack Warhope, in the tiny cabin at the homestead, sat reading by the candle on the small center table—studying would be the truer word, for the book was Professor Asa Gray's celebrated *Manual of Botany*.

The breath of the trees came down over the cliff, caught and rustled the pliant sprays of the crimson Rambler, then the countryside settled still; the words of the book blurred, dimmed, faded away, and from the transfigured page there looked out at him a face with laughing eyes.

A trim slim figure, flitting with unconscious grace across the lawn to where a tall, suave, profoundly bowing man awaited by the rustic seat under the great maple at Whispering

Spring, crossed his mind—and the face was gone.

He laid the book aside; blew out the candle; turned his chair and sat staring into the fire, still faintly alive and fast waning, behind the open hearth of the cook stove. A stick burned in two, fell into the coals and stirred out a tiny shower of sparks. A bright little blaze flared up, danced over the walls and timbers of the cabin, glinted upon the sword and spurs hanging under the companion pictures beneath the draped flag.

In the glowing embers another face began to form, slowly—a face handsome in spite of its forbidding beard, formidable spectacles and drawn, peering eyes. A bar of fire glow fell across it; transformed it into a face stern and severe. Every act of the eccentric preacher-schoolmaster, since the day the Milford Stage dropped him in front of the post-office, passed before his mind—every act, as far as known, had been scrupulously circumspect.

Dreaming there by the dead embers of the fire, the woodsman found himself analyzing the preacher, in his careful way, from shiny boots to high hat. The ill-health excuse he had never

believed, or rather, had set it down to an imaginary ailment—the man looked absolutely fit to enter a cross-country relay. He eliminated the elaborate frock coat, stiff neck stock, high hat and spectacles—divested of all oddities and accessories, there remained a tall and very capable man.

Then, there was the ivory handled six-gun that happened to thud against the bottom of the skiff, and a pair of very deft hands feeling over the stacks of clothes—a circumstance that had totally escaped the other members of the seining party. Besides, there was the perfect agreement of the heelprints on the dusty deck of the concealed house-boat—another circumstance that he alone knew.

If he *was* a college professor and a minister what was he doing in the Flatwoods? If he was not, still, what was he doing in the Flatwoods?

As he pondered, suddenly the dark face that had flared up from the floor of the woods and glowered at him over the log, slid into his mind. So close it came upon the heels of his attempted analysis of the preacher that the two thoughts fused into one. The connection was startling. It brought him up out of his chair and left him

staring through the open cabin door into the night.

Was there a connection? Might it be possible that Ken, crime-stained and low-fallen, had sneaked back to the Flatwoods, and the preacher, being a college friend, was trying to befriend him—possibly save him? But no; there was the letter—it was absolutely genuine.

The woodsman straightened and stretched to rouse himself from the wild spell of the thought, to drag himself back from the drift of it; felt the revolver at his hip; crossed the floor and stepped out into the yard.

The night was unruffled; the woods breathed softly in the pale starlight. Back in the hills a red fox was barking; over in the bottoms a plover whistled his melancholy call; the lonesome wail of a timber wolf drifted down out of Eagle Hollow.

But for the true woodsman the night has messages that other ears do not hear. As he stood in the yard sifting the sounds that rode the air, he suddenly bent forward and stood keenly listening. The frogs in Eagle Run, just below the bridge in front of Uncle Nick's, had abruptly stopped croaking, only to begin again after a

moment, while the frogs farther down fell silent—somebody was walking along the bank of the little stream. Somebody—frogs do not stop croaking at the tread of cattle or other like animals.

It was near midnight. Why should anybody be prowling in so secluded a spot at such an hour? The alert and experienced woodsman could even gauge the speed of the prowler by the successive silences that fell as he moved down the stream. He was going slowly—possibly creeping.

From the bridge at Uncle Nick's a foot-path led down the east bank of Eagle Run and divided a short distance below, one fork leading around the base of Black Rock to the Warhope homestead, the other on down the stream, through a small pasture lot and into the park-like orchard and grounds of Simon Colin. It was along this fork of the path that the night prowler was apparently stealing.

The woodsman hurriedly closed the cabin door, ran across the corner of the fallow yard, and the next moment was creeping cautiously along the fork of the path that led around under the dense shadows at the base of Black Rock.

The caution of Jack Warhope was seldom at fault. There was always the chance that the woodcraft of the man he followed was as fine as his own. He paid him the compliment of keeping back from the stream, out of ear-shot of the frogs, and silently took up the trail.

Where the path crossed the fence into the little park the prowler stopped and stood for some time listening intently.

It is a law of the woods—fundamental and primary, whether stalking animals or men—that the woodsman must never move while the creature he stalks is still. Jack, hardly twenty steps away, stood quiet as the breath of the night and waited.

With a final searching look in every direction, the man by the fence climbed cautiously over and stole down the creek bank into the little park. Jack crept up to the fence, crawled over and followed.

At Whispering Spring the night prowler crouched down by the rustic seat, put his hands to his mouth and very cleverly imitated the quavering call of the screech owl. Jack seized the favorable moment, crept up as near as he deemed prudent and hid in the dense shadow of a clump of shrubbery.

The night was so placid that during the intervals between the imitative calls the low murmur of Whispering Spring fell distinct and clear upon the silence. A few steps away the red-roofed cottage bulked large in the gloom.

The man had already twice given his call and was about to give it a third time, when the parlor door at the front of the house rather noisily opened, and a man came down off the porch and across the yard. As he walked over the brink of the slight decline where the yard dipped to the creek, he passed in outline for a brief moment against the southern sky.

It was the preacher.

His glasses were off, the stoop gone from his shoulders and his step showed not a sign of mincing. He was partly dressed, partly in his night clothes—precisely as one who had wakened naturally from sleep and gone into the yard for some trifling purpose or other. There was a light spot at his hip which the watcher under the clump of shrubbery surmised to be the ivory handle of the six-gun that had thudded against the bottom of the skiff.

He went straight to the spring, took down the dipper and dipped himself a drink, making a deal of noise in the act—even an unnecessary

amount of it, as it seemed to the critical ears under the shrubbery.

The drink over, he hung up the dipper, with another clatter; sauntered past the man crouched by the rustic seat; snatched something that was reached out to him; hid it in the bosom of his shirt; whispered a very hurried word or two; strolled back up the yard; crossed the porch; reentered the parlor door and locked it behind him.

The man crouching by the seat half rose and slipped back the way he had come, the frogs, as before, falling silent as he came even with them and resuming their croak again after he had passed. Jack tried hard to make him out as he stole by, less than a dozen steps away, but he was so stooped and so shrouded in gloom that the effort was in vain.

And so they had come—and gone. A burden seemed to be lifted from the night. A clean breeze came down out of the cool dells of the serene woods as if to sweep away the taint of their presence.

The woodsman lay a long time listening, and reviewing the astonishing pantomime. Not a sound did he hear. He glanced up at the red-

roofed cottage. From porch step to gable it lay as peaceful as its background of placid sky. It was hard to think that at that moment it might be standing at the danger-center of some intangible web of evil that was being woven about it.

He knew the lay of the house as well as he knew his own small cabin—along the south and fronting the road the seldom used parlor, with the spare bedroom opening off from it on the east; back of these the sitting-room, and the old banker's bedroom adjoining it, with the small room containing his safe opening off it on the west and extending some distance beyond the main wall; back of these rooms the dining-room and back of it the kitchen.

Front entrance to both parlor and sitting-room was from the wide porch, which filled up almost the entire jog between the parlor and the small room that served as office.

Mrs. Curry and Texie both slept up-stairs, the latter over the old banker's bedroom, the former over the office. There were no rooms above the parlor and spare bedroom, these, with the porch, being a later addition to the original building.

With every possible caution Jack slowly crawled up the yard, around back of the house, and under the partly open window of the parlor bedroom; lay listening for a guarded moment; then rose, noiseless as the night, and peeped within.

On a chair just under the window hung the somber frock coat; on the bed a man breathed even and deep, apparently sleeping as tranquilly as a tired athlete.

CHAPTER XV

KNIVES OF THE NIGHT

A MAN strolling carelessly through the woods would be surprised to know how many eyes are on him, how many creatures scrooch in the covers and wait for him to pass. He might even imagine from the silence that he is alone. The true woodsman knows that he is never alone, that his slightest move is watched by a thousand eyes. The stillness does not deceive him.

But let something happen—a stick snap, or some creature break cover in sudden panic—and instantly all is commotion. The still woods wake to the call of voices, the beat of wings, the clatter of scampering feet.

In such quiet lay the forest next morning when Jack Warhope, threading the dew-bathed glades, inadvertently stepped on a brush that flipped up and rattled some dead leaves lodged in a thick cluster of sprouts growing about an old white oak stump.

A pheasant that happened to be hiding under the brush instantly flushed. It seemed as if the flurry of his wings fanned the whole woods alive. A fox squirrel bounced up out of the leaves and skurried away; a chipmunk dived into his den; a pair of blue jays set up their strident screech; a crow left the dead limb of an oak and went floundering along over the tree-tops squawking the news that the most dangerous animal in the world—a man—was loose in the woods.

With the heavy shotgun he carried—a present from the banker—Jack covered the pheasant as it glanced away until it blended with the dull gray of the trees and faded from sight. He dropped the butt of the gun to the leaves and stood listening to the beat of the swift wings, growing fainter, finally ending abruptly, and he knew the bird had settled again to the brush.

“Well, ol’ drummer,” he chuckled, speaking half aloud—a habit the woods teach men—and throwing the shotgun lightly across his arm, “y’u didn’t need t’ rush off without s’ much as sayin’ good morning. I could ’a’ stopped y’u, if I’d be’n a-mind to. I had y’u right on the end of my trigger finger.”

Though Jack Warhope was considered a man of clumsy tongue, he could talk well enough to himself, or to the creatures of the woods. He even had a curiously sane and sensible philosophy—a sort of romantic idealism—that outcropped at such times.

The woods—the true, the constant, the steadfast woods—the first instinct of unspoiled men with a heartache—the vastness, the all sufficiency, the immense Shekinah of the solitudes. With the gun lying across his arm he stepped cautiously to where the pheasant had flushed and peered about under the brush and bushes.

As his straining gaze searched with extreme minuteness every leaf, or glimpse of weed or bark or grass blade, gradually a grayish-brown spot, just where the bush of a fallen limb lay along the side of a crumbling log, began to take shape. He shifted his position for a better view,—the gray-brown spot was gone.

He located it again, and, as he looked, slowly there grew out of the blending colors of the copse the figure of a hen pheasant on the nest, so perfectly harmonizing with the leaves and brush among which she hovered that only the very keenest eye could have spied her out at all.

A moment he gazed, and slipped away as noiselessly as he had come.

"Let 'er alone," he muttered when at a safe distance. "Let 'er think I couldn't find 'er. She'll think if I couldn't the fox can't, and he's her greatest dread right now."

The trees were hardly leaved out enough yet to conceal a man walking carelessly through them, or fully keep back the sun from peeping down through the thick tangle of twigs and coaxing forth flower and grass blade from the quickening mold. The silver sheath of the hickory buds had already burst and sprung wide apart, the delicate green of the crinkled, newborn leaves appearing in sharp contrast to the purple sheen lining the rent scales. The oaks had begun to thrust forth the tender tips of their new foliage, investing the waking forest with a tint of faint grayish red, as if to the infant leaves some trace of the birth blush still clung.

Upon the floor of the woods spring had already spread a carpet of infinite color and design, new and bright and still unsoiled—here a fancy spangled pattern of spring beauties; there a pattern of solid green where the may-apples opened their umbrellas to the light, in

readiness to shield the fragile flowers of white wax that were soon to hover beneath their sheltering folds; and, draped over all, a shimmering silver haze, the gracious benediction of the skies.

The man stopped before a crab-apple tree, the buds of which were opened just enough to make one curious to see more of the beautiful mystery folded teasingly away within the protecting scales. Already some bees, pioneers of their tribe, fussed about the aromatic clusters of peeping color, gathering statistics on the season's honey crop.

A breeze stirred the trees, as if the woods were taking a deeper breath. Jack lifted his shoulders and filled his lungs with the nectar-laden air. Warmed by the exuberance of life that rustled and quivered and thrilled around him, there gushed up within him the Jubilate of a man wooed by the genial day into almost primal closeness to nature. He dropped the butt of the gun to the leaves, leaned lightly upon it and stood listening to the dull droning of the bees.

A flash of red flamed through the trees and stopped almost directly above his head in the

top twigs of a hickory sapling, and there swelled out a wild burst of reckless melody that clothed the hickory with music as the opening buds clothed the crab-apple tree with beauty.

"I thought so, ol' warcoat," the man muttered, glancing up. "You know where she is, don't y'u?"

He stepped softly toward the crab-apple tree—the wild song-burst in the hickory ceasing the instant he moved—and peered in through the gnarled limbs and tangled twigs.

Snugged down among some drifted dead leaves he found it, the treasure that inspired the cardinal's song—a roughly built, deep little nest, and, shining above its edge, a dark glossy crest, some long tail feathers, a short, heavy, reddish bill and a round glittering eye, black as a dewberry.

He let the limb he had bent aside swing slowly back into place and stole away.

"Alw'ys two," ran his thought—"a pair; mates—it's nature's way. Pheasants and cardinals and folks—they're all the same—though birds and beasts alw'ys run true, while folks—sometimes—oh, well—"

He walked away toward the west, coming at

length to where the uplands ended abruptly in the line of wooded bluffs that fell steeply to the deep and winding scar of Eagle Hollow, and the exact point where the double trail had run plainest the day before—a fact that had doubtless brought him just there. He bent a critical look upon the loutish trail; carefully crossed it; stepped out under a clump of haw trees at the very brink of the bluff and stood keenly searching the woods in every direction.

Below him and a short distance farther down the hollow an old deserted cabin of mud-daubed logs squatted against the bluff a few yards back from the Eagle Hollow Road. The place had a reputation in the Flatwoods. It was the uncanny hovel of dead Henry Spencer, a wood-chopper, who, on a winter night years before, while in a drunken frenzy, had murdered his wife and infant daughter with his ax, then had wandered out half naked and frozen to death in the snow.

What had once been yard and tiny garden was now overrun with weeds so rank that storms and snow could no longer break them down. A fallen oak had but just missed the cabin, and lay so close to one corner that some

wild cucumber vines of the season before had crossed to the ruined roof and still hung in brown and dead festoons stretched from the fast decaying clapboards to the fungous warted branches.

A pair of chimney swallows, true prophets of summer, darted in and out of the crumbling chimney. A yellow-hammer loped down out of the woods, lighted upon the dry and sounding comb-board and drummed a challenge to all and sundry other yellow-hammers—or was it a love call to his mate in the dead limb of a sycamore down at the creek across the road?

The sound drew the eyes of the man. At the moment one of the swallows rose above the roof. As he followed its flight, the chimneys and gables of the red-roofed cottage, nearly a mile away down the hollow, came unexpectedly within his range of vision. His brows drew together; he gripped the shotgun; turned and strode through the fringing brambles back among the trees.

Half a mile farther up the hollow, at the point where he had left off following the double trail the day before, he picked his way down the rough and stony side of the wooded bluff to the

road. He was just in the act of stepping out from the fringing trees to cross it when the soft swish of a bush a short distance above caught his quick ear.

Remembering that sinister face behind the log, he threw the heavy shotgun to instant readiness and stood dead still, his eyes searching every leaf and twig along the hillside.

There came a soft footfall, the bushes swayed, parted, and a young woman stepped out into the comparatively open glade where he stood—a girl that he had never seen, flushed and breathing hard.

She saw him on the instant, and her face went white. She darted in among the bushes again, stopped, came slowly back, stood studying him. He was as closely studying her—plainly, even shabbily dressed; her faded sunbonnet awry; her hair disheveled by the brambles; but, in spite of all, comely, and ruddy with health.

She made a quick effort to adjust the sunbonnet; spared a hasty touch to the disheveled hair and raised her eyes. He noticed they were blue.

“You don’t chance t’ be Mr.—Big Jack—?”

The woodsman studied her from under half closed lids.

"They call me—that—" He raised his eyes a trifle. "And you?"

She glanced uneasily up the hollow and back to his face. Half covertly searching his eyes, she seemed to gather reassurance from the level frankness of them.

"I 'lowed y'u—must be—" She glanced back at the bushes; drew a step away from them, as if she feared that hands might come out of them and clutch her. "I'm—Jennie Belden—an' I wus on the way t'—find you—"

Quite evidently much disturbed, she missed the quick lift of the man's shoulders. She glanced again at the bushes, listened a moment, drew a step nearer and lowered her voice.

"You're in dreadful danger, an' I wus comin' t' warn y'u. I don't know what y'u've done, but y'u ain't safe a minute. Of course I know y'u hurt brother Loge's hand, but it ain't that, an' there's another man more dangerous than him, an' a—third man more dangerous than both. There wus eyes on y'u yisterd'y. Ther' ain't none on y'u this mornin'—n'r on me, an' that's why I could slip away—but ther' will be. Stay out o' the woods, an' don't show a light at night, an' don't come out if anybody calls y'u"—she

involuntarily glanced up the hollow, shivered, wrung her hands—"an' please, please, don't breathe a word about seein' me! They'd—kill me if they knowed—not even brother Loge could withstand 'em."

She was talking fast, in low and hurried whispers. Apparently she fancied that her words were not making the full impression she wished, for she drew still nearer—so close that Jack could hear the quick purr of her breath.

"You ain't skeered—?" She stopped; stood studying him: "But, of course, I don't reckon y'u *would* be—a man like you. But please b'lieve me, an' heed me. The woods has eyes; the night has knives." She bent her head; she seemed struggling with some inner thought. "That—third man," she muttered, "he waits, an' bides his time, an' when he strikes, he—kills."

She whirled on the instant, like some startled creature of the woods, and was gone. He strode a surprised step after her, even called softly. There came back to him only the low swish of the bushes and the soft fall of receding steps.

CHAPTER XVI

THE OPEN TRAIL

LIKE a shadow the girl—a far wanderer from the Kentucky mountains—had come; like a shadow gone. One moment the swaying bushes had flared forth her face, with its startled eyes, the next moment had swallowed it up.

The woodsman came back to the edge of the road and stood pondering her message—her warning; felt over in his careful way each hurried word; tried to cast them up and arrive at the exact sum total of them. The thought crossed his mind that she might have been wrought up over an imaginary danger; but no, it was real enough that she had dared personal harm to warn him—and her eyes were honest.

That the man who had glowered at him over the log was in some way associated with Loge Belden he had already surmised from the fact that the man had taken up Belden's quarrel at

the schoolhouse—besides, his trail had led that way. But the utmost of their combined grievance could hardly warrant such a threat as the mountain girl had plainly hinted. There must be something back of it all—something that cut deeper than gashed hands and sore jaws.

The girl's last muttered words—"that third man" that "waits, an' bides his time, an' when he strikes, he kills"—suddenly assumed a deeper meaning. He darted a quick look down the hollow—a deep scar winding like the trail of a dragon between the hills—where, more than a mile away, hidden from view by the dense woods, the village lay like some hapless creature that had barely escaped the dragon's jaws; then frowned toward the narrow valley's head where the weather-blackened roof of a squalid cabin could barely be seen through the trees. A slow sternness crawled into his eyes; he dropped the butt of the shotgun to the leaves; leaned upon it and stood staring down at the road.

Gradually, as he stared, there grew upon him the consciousness of an outline of a single footprint at the other side of the road—detached, alone, apparently with no mark of any kind

leading either to it or from it. The singular fact of its seemingly perfect isolation slowly reached him, and won a place among the troop of thoughts that gripped him.

He crossed the road and stooped over the faint outline. It was plainly a man's track, wide and long. He studied it closely a moment, grunted and then grinned.

"Uncle Nick," he muttered. "Heel deepest—he's jumped—where from—?"

He glanced at the other side of the road where the take-off must have been to land a leap just there and after a short search found where the old man's boot had scraped the moss a little in making the spring.

"Aimin' f'r that slab of sandstone," he chuckled, his eyes losing a mite of their hardness, "fell a bit shy and landed in the soft dirt—mighty good jump, at that, f'r a man with eighty-odd years on 'is back."

Stooping again over the isolated footprint, he examined it with closest attention, trying at the same time to call up all the lore of the trail that the old ranger had taken such pride in teaching him—the wise and wonderful ways of woodcraft that he had taken an equal pride in learn-

ing, until, next to Uncle Nick himself, he was known to be the most skilful woodsman along the Wabash. As he looked, a grass stem that had been bent down and slightly hung in the soil suddenly loosed and straightened.

"Hot trail, ol' scout master," he muttered, in the half spoken soliloquy that nature sometimes teaches her favorites. "And there y'u go, pick-in' y'ur steps so's t' hit the hard spots and miss the soft ones."

A sudden thoughtfulness crossed his face.

"I wonder why y'u're so p'tic'lar t' hide y'ur trail, though—there ain't no Pottawatomies t' find it no more. Mebbe the woods jist filled y'u s' full this wonderful morning, like they have me, that y'u can't help playin' a while at the ol' war game of the trail. Well, I'll play with y'u—and I'll run y'u down b'fore the shadow of the bluffs climbs out of the crick."

After a searching glance in every direction, so keen and critical that it appeared to handle with minuteness every bush and tree within range of his eye, and a further moment spent in sounding the woods for any false note they might carry, he threw the shotgun into the hollow of his well arm and took up the trail.

It led across the two or three rods of broken ground between the road and the little stream, which, at that point, sparkled along over a shallow riffle. Once, as his old friend had sprung from stone to stone in crossing, his boot had slipped and gone into the water. After that every alternate stone on which he had stepped, was still damp from the wet boot.

Jack sprang eagerly across the creek and into the bushes on the other side. The trail led on between two patches of alders, under a plum thicket, through briars and brambles, until the hollow was crossed, then up the wooded steep of the opposite bluff and away to the north.

He had followed to a point well within sight of Loge Belden's cabin when, barely a hundred yards ahead, he caught a glimpse of a man stealing from cover to cover—just a flash as he flitted from one hazel thicket to another, but that was enough. That tall form, erect as an Indian, those iron-gray locks, falling loosely from under the quaint old cap of hand-dressed coonskin, could belong to but one man in the world—Uncle Nick.

Jack instantly darted to cover and began stalking the old ranger. Barely fifty yards sep-

arated them when, as he peeped from behind an oak, he saw the old man steal out from a dense thicket of wild grape-vines, dart across an open space and throw himself flat behind a decaying log.

Crawling up behind a huge sugar maple that stood barely more than a rod from the log, Jack rose to his feet, a grin spreading over his face as he thought of the surprise he was about to spring upon his old friend.

He was just bracing himself for the rush when a hand fell upon his shoulder, and, whirling with sudden startlement, he found himself looking with foolish vacancy into the quizzically twinkling eyes of—Uncle Nick.

At sight of his young friend's bewildered face the shoulders of the old hunter shook with merriment, though not a sound passed his lips—the silent laughter that long years in the woods, when they were dangerous, had taught him.

"An' did y'u think t' take the ol' man by surprise? Did y'u, lad?"

He opened his mouth in another upheaval of silent merriment, his still sinewy shoulders heaving up and down and jostling his iron-gray locks about his ears.

"Jist bracin' y'urse'f f'r the rush, werdn't y'u?"

"I—I—thought y'u was b'hind the log."

The old ranger's eyes danced and his mouth spread wide.

"I wus."

"Yes—but how?—w'y I had m' eye on that log every second."

"Egzac'ly"—the sinewy shoulders heaved up and down again—"calc'lated y'u would. 'Stid o' keepin' y'ur eye on the log, y'u ort 'a' kep' it on the pass to the nighest cover—ol' Injin trick—show y'u sometime."

The young man glanced at the log, noted the space of practically open ground that must have been crossed in order to reach the nearest cover, and turned to his aged companion in frank admiration.

"Wonder if I ever *will* be as handy as you?"

"'Tain't likely—y'ur life don't depend on it, like mine use'n to sixty year ago. Y'u're far handier a'ready than any other man in the woods. But woodcraft will never ag'in be what it once't wus. People even kinda look down on it now'days. They're s' wrapped up in book l'arnin' an' lan' grabbin' an' money graspin' that

they think it's a kind of disgrace—some of 'em—t' even l'arn t' shoot. No, no, woodcraft will never ag'in be what it once't wus—never ag'in."

A faint suspicion of bitterness, of homesickness for scenes long gone—for the stimulating uncertainties of the perilous trail,—quavered in the old man's tones. He stooped, plucked off a tender shoot from a sassafras sprout and stood chewing it meditatively.

"How come y'u left y'ur trail s' open this morning?" asked Jack. "I picked it up where y'u jumped the road."

The question seemed to recall the old man's straying thoughts.

"Yes, an' y'u ort' 'a' picked it up long b'fore. Y'u crossed it twice't b'fore ever y'u come down the bluffs—once't about a hundred yards west o' the pheasant's nest, an' ag'in a leetle no'th of whar y'u stood lookin' down at Hen Spencer's ol' cabin. You wus a-runnin' with sich a high nose that I jumped in the soft dirt thar at the road an' left wet tracks on the rocks at the riffle a-purpose."

A flush spread over the face of the younger man.

"I might 'a' knowed it," he muttered in hur-

ried embarrassment—which the elder man was quick to notice.

“No harm, lad, no harm—not another man in the woods would ‘a’ picked it up, open ‘r shet. But y’u didn’t hardly act like y’urse’f this mornin’—y’u acted kinda keerless an’ fur away, like—so I left the trail open a leetle thar at the road an’ at the crick.”

The young man turned away and stood gazing out across the brush tangled hollow. A cloud crossed his face, as the mist settles above the river at evening, and he wondered at the hawk-like eyes of his old friend that had read out his deep unrest.

“And me thinkin’ t’ take by su’prise the famous ranger that found the trail of the great Tecumseh, when it was hid from the best of the runners,” he said warmly—“and you was jist playin’ with me.”

At reference to the far-famed achievement of his younger days, the shoulders of the old hunter seemed to grow a little more erect, while his dark eyes glowed with a faint suggestion of the fire that in his prime had made them the hardest pair of eyes on the border to pass unseen.

"Well, not jist playin', nuther." He chewed hard on the sassafras sprout a moment. "You must 'a' purt nigh run into that gal a leetle bit ago?"

A statement with the force of a question—the young man started, but hid the movement by fumbling with his sore shoulder. The terrified face of the mountain girl freshened in his mind, with the dread of discovery in her startled eyes. He hitched the blouse loose from his shoulder and glanced out across the hollow without meeting his old friend's look.

"What gal?"

The old man jerked a hand toward the opposite bluff.

"Aw, I jist glimpsed one a-peakin' along through the brush yonder an' 'lowed mebbe y'u might 'a' run acrosst 'er."

He stood chewing the sassafrass shoot and looking away down the hollow in the direction of Black Rock. The young man breathed easier—the girl's secret was safe. The hawk-like eyes had missed the chance meeting—seemingly the one thing they *had* missed, as his next words half startlingly disclosed.

"What did y'u make o' them tracks y'u fol-

ler'd yisterd'y—from them bushes on the edge o' the cliff back o' y'ur cabin an' past the ol' log? I see'd y'u'd be'n foller'n' 'em as I crossed the trail m'se'f this mornin'.

The young man bent an amazed look upon his aged friend, lost in wonder at his marvelous woodcraft.

"I got a look at the man that made 'em," was his slow answer, "while he laid b'hind that log a-watchin' me straighten up the fence. I don't think he knows I saw 'im, but I did—it was the feller that stirred up all that rumpus at the schoolhouse night b'fore last."

The old man threw away his sassafras shoot; an eager seriousness crossed his face.

"That wus Black Bogus."

The younger man stared.

"No!"

"Hit were."

The woodsman fell suddenly thoughtful; glanced away across the hollow toward where the double trail led through the woods. The old man studied him curiously. It may be each was thinking the same thought—that strange resemblance that had so puzzled them both—but neither let fall any inkling of it to the other.

"Al knows 'im," Uncle Nick went on after a moment. "He's a friend of Loge Belden's—an' he thinks mebbe he's harborin' up thar with 'im."

He jerked his thumb up the hollow toward where a section of the warped roof of Loge Belden's squalid cabin barely protruded above the bushes; seemed to weigh his next words before letting them fall.

"Anyhow, I thought I'd p'int m' nose up the crick an' kinda throw an eye on Loge's cabin t' see if 'e is."

"An' if 'e is—?" the other questioned, having caught the curious look.

The caution of a lifetime in the woods prompted the old hunter to look guardedly in every direction before answering.

"Don't let on y'u know it"—he came a step nearer—"but Al says Belden b'longs t' the same gang o' cutthroats down Vincennes way that Black Bogus does, an' he thinks more 'n likely they're plottin' t' crack ol' Sime Colin's safe."

The hardness that had come at the mountain girl's warning crept again into the woodsman's eyes, but he made no comment. The other, knowing him well, did not seem to expect any.

"I 'low y'u nee'n' t' be told they ain't neither one got much time f'r you, after what happened at the post-office an' at the schoolhouse—an' they're the kind that won't stay licked, an' the kind that strikes in the dark."

Jack picked up the heavy shotgun from where he had laid it aside when about to rush upon his old friend, thoughtfully blew a dead grass blade out from between the hammer and the lock, but offered no word. The old man again bent his furtive look upon him and went on.

"Black Bogus—they's fifty sheriffs a-lookin' f'r him, an' a standin' reward of five thousan' dollars, dead 'r alive—"

The young man flinched, looked keenly at the other.

"Uncle Nick—y'u wouldn't—!"

"No, I wouldn't," the old man replied with instant readiness to the half implied imputation. "I've shot men in my time; I never sold one."

He stepped around the great sugar maple, motioned for the other to follow, and stole away along the brow of the bluff, quite obviously in serious earnest.

The young woodsman fell into the trail. Steeped in the caution that came from much liv-

ing alone, he said nothing, but it was the one thing that had brought him to the woods that morning—to have a look at Loge Belden's cabin.

Reaching a point, at length, a short distance below where the suspected cabin squatted, they crept down the bed of a dry wash-out and through some thickets of brier and hazel until they lay within less than a hundred yards of its crude and mud daubed walls.

There seemed to be no one about except the comely mountain girl, who came to the open door a time or two to look out, as if she expected some one—some one that she would rather not see, to judge by the troubled expression of her face—a face whose tragic sadness had so impressed the woodsman at that strained and hurried interview.

It was late in the forenoon when, above them on the hillside, they heard the swish of a brush swinging back into place after having been dragged aside. Uncle Nick held up a cautious finger, and they crouched lower in the cover.

There came the snap of a dry stick; a man emerged from the swaying bushes and stole toward the back door of the cabin, passing within

a dozen steps of where they lay. There could be no mistaking the powerful form and truculent face with its stubble of beard—it was Black Bogus.

CHAPTER XVII

ASHES OF THE PAST

It was little enough that the red-roofed cottage saw of the young preacher—breakfast by candle light; supper the same; an hour of twilight with Texie on the rustic seat at Whispering Spring. The rest of the day he spent in the study at the parsonage, where, at the insistence of the venerable widow, he lunched. He proved to be a very studious man. It was a rare thing indeed to see him in daylight when his peering eyes were not poring over a book, with another usually tucked under his arm.

Jack Warhope had not yet climbed the bluffs to the woods on the morning of that eventful day that flared forth the startled face of the mountain girl with her hurried warning; its dawn still clung to cliff and scar, and many candles were still alight in the village, when the preacher left the parlor bedroom and came out on the porch.

Texie was already on the lawn, flitting about among the flowers and gathering a bouquet for the breakfast table.

She was like them—the flowers; as much a part of the rich life of the lawn as they. Life—it radiated from every curve of her pliant body; it was the one thought that came first to mind when looking on her. There were butterflies in the mellow glow already arched above the rim of the east and sifting in through the cool trees adrip with dew, but she was more alive than they.

At sight of her, a-tiptoe by a lilac bush and reaching up for one of its choicest blossoms, the studious concentration left the face of the man on the porch and there came over his features a curious sadness—a sadness touched with fire, as if within him had suddenly flared up some desperate battle of the soul.

The girl had heard the step on the porch. With the coveted blossom in her hand at last, she placed it with the others, and turned with a smile of sensible frankness.

The precise and studious concentration instantly returned to the eyes behind the spectacles, the stoop came back to the capable

shoulders, and, with the quick, mincing step that was as much a part of him as the frock coat and neck stock, he came down off the porch and joined her.

With the stately and somewhat ponderous courtesy of seventy years ago, he had taken the shears, begging to be allowed to cut the flowers, when the slam of a gate drew their eyes to the back of the yard. The old banker was just coming from the barn, his step leaving a rumpled trail in the gray dew of the lawn, his rugged face apparently full of its accustomed strength and color.

"W'y, father, I expected you'd stay in bed a while this morning yet, after that—fainty spell the other night."

"Bed! No place f'r a well man after daylight"—he pulled himself up to the last inch of his gaunt height; stretched up his arms; filled his chest with the dew-washed air; expelled it with an explosive exclamation that scared a couple of blackbirds in the branches above; and the crags and battlements of his grim old face smoothed themselves out into an expression as near as they could come to a smile—"an' I *am* a well man—fit as a fiddle."

"But, father, you won't *think* of goin' to the—office t'-day?"

"Aw, I reckon y'u'd all r'ar up if I did."

"I'm so glad—and won't it be nice t' have y'u at home all day ag'in! Mis' Curry shall cook your favorite boiled ham and cabbage f'r dinner, and I'll make y'u a nice custard pie—jist the way you like it. I wish y'u never *would* go back t' that horrid ol' office ag'in."

The old man put his arm around her and patted her shoulder.

"You're a good gal, Texie. I dunno what y'ur ol' father would do without y'u, now that—that—"

He stopped; let his eyes stray up the river and far into the east, all flushed and spangled with the close coming of the sun; the girl bent her head; the preacher stood fumbling the shears in his hand.

"Mebbe I *will* quit the office one o' these days."

His eyes were still lost in the east; he spoke as if his heart was there. His daughter raised her head and searched his face.

"You alw'ys say that, but y'u never do."

"I dunno, better walk out than be carried out,

they say, an' I've come almighty nigh that very thing a time 'r two—heap nigher"—he brought his eyes back out of the east; noticed the hurt on his daughter's face and patted her shoulder.

The sitting-room door opened, and the portly form of the housekeeper appeared on the porch.

"There's Mis' Curry," the girl cried, seizing her father's arm and inviting the preacher with her eyes. "Breakfast's ready, and our bouquet not half finished."

She was the life of the little group that assembled a few minutes later in the gloomy old dining-room, with the candles flickering over its bare walls and waging a losing battle with the shadows lurking in the corners. Only for her, the scene and setting might have been somber enough—the stark walls, stiff old furniture, decorations and ornamentation severely in keeping with the taste of a day long gone; the grim gray figure that presided at the head of the table.

Banker Colin was a man out of whom life had squeezed most of the finer sensibilities and coined them into gold. The dreams of boyhood, the romance of youth, the glory of manhood—gone—bargained away for a price. Sitting

there at his gloomy breakfast table, a disappointed, weary old man, his soul cried out to rue the bargain; to trade back with fate. But none had learned the lesson better than he that fate trades not back; that there he was doomed to sit, a hopeless mourner over the dead ashes of the might-have-been.

The forenoon he spent in the small room, busy with his papers, or in meeting people who came to pay him money—or borrow it.

In the afternoon he tried to take a nap, but so long had his mind been set to its daily grind that it now ran on in spite of him—a sort of mental engine whose clutch could no longer be released.

Rest; a quiet nap—they were no longer his. He had sold them—part of the price he had paid for—what?—the privilege to pocket interest money; to collect rents; to write his check. Cheated again. The devil never loses in a trade.

It would be a hopeless task to trace his thoughts as he thrashed about over the bed and fidgeted the hours away. His business; the farms; his squandered years all passed in review. And what was left? To sit by a musty window and pile up wealth—for somebody else

to spend. He couldn't spend it himself. He didn't know how. He had toiled so hard to make it that he had never learned how to spend it—an infinitely finer thing to know.

Sleep!—he was never wider awake in his life. He floundered off the bed at last, less rested than when he lay down, and stormed out to the porch—only to stand drumming a restless tattoo upon a post with his long bony fingers.

The voices of Texie and the preacher were borne to him from the rustic seat under the giant maple at Whispering Spring. He mildly wondered at it; reflected that the genial day had probably for once lured the young man from his studies, and sauntered back to his easy chair in the sitting-room.

As he sat there, with the pulse and purr of the wonderful May day borne in through the open door, his mind groping back over the distant past, a memory held him in far-flung retrospection. Minutes long it held him; until it smoothed the lines on his face and softened his hard old eyes.

He rose from the chair at last; paced back and forth across the floor a time or two; went into the small west room to his safe; unlocked

it; with a noticeable effort swung the heavy door open; fumbled inside and drew out a large envelope of stout manilla paper; unsealed; fumbled deeper and brought out a small locket of gold; closed the safe, without locking it, and went back to his easy chair.

A long time he sat, with his elbow propped up on the chair-arm, his chin in his palm; finally with fingers that trembled, he pressed in the catch of the locket. It sprang open. There were two pictures inside—a woman and a man. But the face of the woman was not the face over the mantel in the sitting-room; it was the face of the woman beneath the draped flag in the cabin under the crimson rambler—what it had been in her girlhood. And the face of the man in the locket was not the upstanding soldier above the sword and spurs, in the uniform of a Colonel of Mounted Rangers; it was the face of Simon Colin—what it had been in the days of his young manhood.

The old man gazed at the beautiful, high born face of the woman in the locket; again and again laid it to his grim old lips, held it close against his breast;—suddenly, with a gasp, snapped the locket shut.

A mighty spasm of pain had gripped his side. He clutched it with his hands; fought for breath. When it was over and he was able to breathe again, his lips were blue, and clammy sweat stood heavy on his craggy brow.

Still clutching his side, he opened the locket, with its secret, trying not to see the beautiful face, lest it turn him from his purpose; took out both pictures; struck a match, set them alight and watched them burn to ashes.

As he sat staring, gradually he seemed to grow aware of the envelope lying in his lap. He picked it up and gazed at it absently, as if his mind still dwelt with the dead ashes of the past—the past with its disappointments, its misunderstandings, its tragedy.

In a bold hand that wavered slightly—unmistakably the hand of an old man,—the big envelope was addressed, curiously enough, to Jack Warhope, with the legend—"Not to be opened until his 21st birthday."

After a moment the old man fumbled some legal-looking papers out of the envelope; read them through with great care; replaced them; sealed the envelope and put it in his pocket. Then he walked to the safe; dropped the empty

locket behind some papers at the very back of it; closed the door; locked it and strayed aimlessly out to the porch again.

The shadows of the fine old trees in the yard were creeping well eastward. The preacher, still a truant from his studies, was with Texie at the spring. Just over the brink of the decline where the yard dipped to the park-like orchard, he could see them—the girl on the rustic seat, the tall form of the young minister lounging against a fork of the huge maple.

The drone of their voices carried up to the lonesome old man, at a loss how to spend the hours of his enforced idleness, and the splintered ruins of what had once been a smile for a moment chased the weariness from his craggy old battlement of a face. He dragged a chair to a sunny spot of the porch and sat down.

The girl, hearing the scrape of the chair, sprang up.

“Father!” she cried. “He’s up.”

Springing over the gnarled, exposed roots of the great maple, she hurried up the yard, half laughing back over her shoulder at the preacher’s mincing steps as he followed.

She flew to the porch, and in a moment her

arms were around the weary gray figure in the chair.

"F'rgive me, father—I didn't know y'u was up 'r I'd 'a' come sooner."

"Aw, that's all right," he drawled. "Can't expect young folks t' waste the'r time on old ones."

"No, no! Not waste." She smoothed his hair. "I'm so sorry I f'rgot—your good day at home, too."

The old man patted her face and reassured her, in a voice that the people who borrowed his money had never heard.

"W'y, child, I got up only a little bit ago, an' thought I'd jist set out on the porch a while. It's kinda—lonesome in the house."

"And do y'u feel better after y'ur nap?" the girl asked, glowingly happy at his endearments—endearments that had been all too rare.

"Oceans," was his answer, with a grimace at the idea of the nap—a grimace that he suppressed just in time to keep her from seeing. "Good as new. I be'n wonderin' why y'u never tuck Mr. Hopkins hossback ridin'. Y'u ain't even showed 'im y'ur new saddle hoss, have y'u?"

"Brownie? F'r a wonder, I hain't. But this

is the first time he's ever be'n here, except at night—and he's traveled s' much and knows s' much that I didn't 'low he'd care about hosses. We've jist be'n talking about—Ken—”

The old banker bent his head and fumbled with a loosened screw of the chair-arm. The girl gazed out across the wide bottoms to the river. The preacher took out his handkerchief; nervously brushed away a speck of dust from his coat sleeve; put it back.

“Brownie,” the girl repeated after a time, her eyes turning back from the river to the piously pensive face of the preacher, “*would* y’u care t’ see ’er?”

“It would give me the greatest pleasure,” was his answer, in the studied and faultless though somewhat stilted diction of the period.

“I could talk y’u t’ death about ’er.”

“I should die happy,” he answered.

The girl was so artless and unspoiled that the flattery, trite as it was, half pleased her. The native cheerfulness, subdued for a moment by thoughts of her hapless brother, brightened again in her eyes. She threw an arm about her father, dragged him up out of the chair and led the way to the barn.

Brownie, a beautiful dark sorrel, with a single small patch of white in her forehead, hearing the girl's voice, came trotting up out of the pasture lot—the same through which Jack had trailed the unknown prowler the night before. A tall, clean limbed gelding, bright bay, with one white hind foot, followed her almost up to the gate, where he stood back and half jealously watched the girl caress his mate.

"Come, Rex," the girl called, reaching out her hand and coaxing the tall bay. But the horse kept his distance. It was only after the two men had drawn back a few steps that he came up to the gate and put his nose against her face.

"Do you ride, Mr. Hopkins?" she called over her shoulder.

"Not especially well," he answered, "though I do like a good horse. You ride, of course?"

"Everybody rides in the Flatwoods—you must learn."

"W'y, yes," chimed in the old banker, "there's Rex jist sp'ilin' f'r work, now that I don't ride any more sence these blasted fainty spells got t' comin'. Ther's nothin' t' hender y'u from takin' a ride every day—I reckon we've still got my saddle an' things, ain't we, daughter?"

"Saddle and bridle and all," she answered. "And it will be such a pleasure," she went on, turning to the young preacher, "t' show y'u around over our beautiful Flatwoods."

"With such a guide, I am impatient to go the earliest moment possible," the preacher exclaimed effusively, with a smile that intensified the drawn studiousness of his face rather than relieved it; "this afternoon—now—if you will."

The girl glanced at her father.

"Why not?" he nodded.

"I don't like t' leave—you."

The old man tossed up his hand and laughed—a raspy sort of laugh—all that the years had left him.

The girl turned back to the preacher.

"W'y, yes—if you wish," she said—"only you must promise not t' run away from me; Rex is ever s' much faster than Brownie."

The preacher turned to look again at the tall bay, standing a few feet back from the gate, where he had withdrawn step for step as the minister advanced.

"He certainly appears to possess great speed."

"Speed!" the old banker repeated, a note in his voice common to the throat of every man in

the Flatwoods when speaking of his horse or dog, "next t' Jack's Graylock at the homestead yonder, he's the fastest hoss in the Flatwoods."

"Graylock — Warhope" — the tired eyes pinched together thoughtfully;—"a remarkable young man."

"Scarce as hen's teeth, his breed," the old man returned warmly. "I'm doubtin' if ther's anybody along the Wabash that knows the woods like he does, unless it might be ol' Nick Wiffles. I've alw'ys be'n glad he tuck to 'em the way 'e did, and I've encouraged 'im. Ther's nothin' like the woods t' make a man of a feller."

"Some pr'fessors come up her f'om down the river t' study what they called 'Native Flora' on the homestead last year—y'u know, ther's two thousand acres of it, most of it layin' jist as the Indians left it, and he keeps coaxin' me not t' 'low an ax laid to a single sound tree. There'll be a fortune in that oak and walnut some day. Jack, he'd be'n writin' t' these pr'fessors, and they'd be'n sendin' 'im books—anyhow, they come up and tramped around f'r nigh a week."

"One day one of 'em was talkin' t' me, and he said Jack knowed more about the woods than all the rest of 'em put together. Well, that's

him, every time. I never did know 'im t' try anything but what he got it down about as fine as the next one."

The old banker rested his hand on the gate and gazed—half wistfully—across the orchard to where the skeleton of the unfinished farmhouse showed between the tops of the trees. Of the fact that the young man he had just been so warmly eulogizing was bound in service to him he let fall no word. It was a subject he never mentioned.

He glanced up at the sun slipping down the west and turned to his daughter:

"Well, if y'u're goin', y'u better be startin'."

Long years of active business life had taught Banker Colin the value of promptness and decision—had so ground these traits into his nature that they had come to function automatically. Talking as volubly about the relative merits of Rex and Brownie as if he were an agent trying to sell them, and rubbing his bony hands in delight at having his restless mind set once more to a definite task, he led the way to the lot and turned the horses into the barn.

The saddle and bridle were somewhat stiffened from disuse when he tried them on Rex,

but he had them limbered up and came leading out the horse almost as soon as Texie had Brownie ready.

In the driveway down the yard the girl handed Brownie's rein to her father and ran into the house. When she returned a moment later, she had on a short riding skirt, and was buckling around her waist as she walked the holster of a small and very fancy revolver.

The preacher allowed his eyes to stray over the trim figure and rest on the weapon.

"A present from—Jack," the girl answered to his look, at the same time dropping her fingers to the neat holster—"he trapped mink t' git the money."

"Do they—girls, I mean—carry such—things in the Flatwoods?"

"Sometimes—y'u see, Jack and I ride t'gether, and shoot target s' much—"

"Why, I have one of those—things."

"Have y'u—bring it along and we'll shoot target."

The preacher handed Rex's bridle rein to her and hurried into the house. The old banker, grinning toward his daughter at the eccentric domonie's mincing step, suddenly seemed

to remember something, tapped the breast pocket of his faded coat; drew out the formidable letter addressed to Jack Warhope and handed it to the girl, with the request that she deliver it at the first handy opportunity.

Wondering, the girl looked at the letter and put it away in her blouse, just as the preacher returned carrying in one hand the very dependable-looking ivory handled six-gun that had thudded against the bottom of the skiff on the day of the seining trip. In the other hand he held a very serviceable holster, with its pouch for powder flask, bullets and caps hanging from the belt.

"I bought them just before setting out on my journey for the—West," he explained.

The girl took the beautiful weapon, fully loaded and freshly capped, and looked at it admiringly, while the old banker bent over her shoulder.

"W'y, this gun's be'n shot—a lot," she said, lifting the hammer a trifle and slowly revolving the cylinder.

The preacher dropped a quick look at the weapon.

"Gun," he repeated, with a mite of hesitation

that escaped the others—"is that what you call them? The man who sold it to me called it a revolver. I do wonder if he sold me a second-hand one."

The old banker laughed—raspy; raucous.

"Cheated a-plenty, Parson. This Dolly Varden cannon o' your'n has seen service, 'r I ain't no judge of six-guns."

"Do you mean that it will not shoot?" the preacher asked in anxious tones.

"Lord, no!" the banker returned—"it would drop a man in 'is tracks, but they cheated y'u if they sold it to y'u f'r new."

Texie handed the weapon back to its owner. He thrust it awkwardly into the holster and stood fumbling the belt, wrong side out, around his waist. The girl laughed, showed him how to buckle it on under the somber frock coat, and sprang to the saddle, with an ease and grace that lifted his spectacled eyes.

After two or three unsuccessful attempts he finally succeeded in scrambling to Rex's back and followed her down the drive, where the old banker already had the gate open.

Just through the gate the girl fell suddenly thoughtful.

"Wait—I'll be back in a minute," she said and touching Brownie with the whip, dashed away up the River Road. A moment later under the big elm by the barn-lot gate at the Warhope homestead, she drew rein. While Brownie stood prancing, still a mite resentful at the touch of the whip, the girl's head lifted, her throat and lips tightened, and the clear call of a king cardinal made the great elm musical.

A big man with a mighty spread of shoulder, at work back in the cattle pens, lifted his head and listened. There, it came again—only with a teasing lilt of deeper witchery at the end that no cardinal ever dreamed of.

Strangely enough, the call was repeated back in the cattle pens—a place where no cardinal was ever seen. Next moment Jack Warhope appeared around the corner of a shed, vaulted the fence and came striding down the barn-lot.

"Texie! W'y—"

He opened the gate and came out into the road. The girl smiled upon him curiously; fumbled in her blouse; drew out the letter in the formidable manilla envelope and handed it to him. He took it; gazed at it, and then looked up at the girl.

"'Not to be opened until his 21st birthday,'" he read,—“what d' y'u s'pose Pap Simon's up to now?"

"That's what I be'n wonderin'," was the thoughtful answer, "but I reckon we'll have t' wait till—till—"

"Six more days," he finished, as the girl tightened the reins and pulled Brownie's mouth up from the grass.

"How 'd y'u like t' go ridin'?"

"Me?"

The dimples flashed at him.

"Mr. Hopkins wants t' go."

"Hopkins!"

He shrugged his great shoulders and glanced down the road where the preacher sat on his horse awkwardly in front of the red-roofed cottage.

"Jack—"

He turned back to her; waited for her to go on,

"Be nice to 'im. He knows s' much, and he was good t' pore—Ken—"

He bent his head in respect for the minor note. The soft purr of the elm twigs came out faintly clear on the drowsy day; the girl sat

drawing the cracker of the riding whip up and down between the stirrup and the toe of her shapely small shoe.

"Texie—"

He had looked up; the girl turned her eyes toward him.

"Don't let this—man git no holt on y'u. He ain't no man f'r—you. His ways ain't—our ways—"

The girl lifted her face and laughed—a trifle uneasily.

"Jack, you're alw'ys so—serious. Hurry up and git Graylock."

"How d' y'u know I'm goin'?"

"Ain't y'u?"

He smoothed the mane on Brownie's neck; half turned toward the gate.

"I am if he is."

"Bring y'ur r'volver—we're go'n' t' target shoot."

He wheeled back, for the first time he seemed to notice the holster at her waist.

"I 'low I will," he muttered.

CHAPTER XVIII

A FACE AT THE SMUDGED WINDOW

AUNT LIZA happened to have "drapped a stitch" in her knitting and had stepped to the window the better to see to "pick it up" when the three riders came up the Eagle Hollow Road. She looked up carelessly from her tedious task, but grew instantly attentive with the first glance.

"Come 'ere, Nick—ain't that Big Jack an' Texie an' the new parson?"

"Well, I'll be dern'd," grunted the old man, coming to the window and looking out, his pipe poised between his fingers—"what d' y'u think o' that?"

"What *I* think's a-plenty," the primly positive old woman snorted, "out gallantin' around like that, with two beaux a-traipsin' after 'er—an' that preacher in the Flatwoods bar'ly long enough t' git 'is chair warm. I use'n t' think

right smart o' Texie, but I cayn't swaller no sich carryin's-on as she's a-havin' with the new parson. He ain't never be'n reg'lar installed, no-how, an' if he keeps on like this, 'e won't be.

"Texie Colin may live t' rue the day she draps a fine lad like Big Jack an' takes up with a tee-total furriner, jist b'cayse 'e happens t' be gallantin' an' full o' p'laver."

"Aw, I dunno," the old man interrupted, turning away from the window as the three riders disappeared behind a bend in the road a little above the house, "jist b'cayse she happens t' go out ridin' with 'im, hit ain't no sign she's a-goin' t' take up with 'im."

"That's jist your way," Aunt Liza retorted, still standing at the window and fussing with the snarled knitting, "alw'ys tryin' t' smoothen things over f'r everybody. Did y'u look how 'e set 'is hoss, 'longside o' Big Jack?—huh—I wonder the second best hoss in the Flatwoods would put up with sich ridin'. I knowed that preacher wouldn't do t' tie to the minute 'e lit. Hain't no sense in a preacher *bein'* that good-lookin', no-how—now there's the business of it, I-jeeminy."

Aunt Liza's grim lips twisted up into an acid silence. She bent again over the "drapped

stitch;" "picked it up" at last and came back to her rocking chair.

The old man, doubtless glad to rest after his long tramp in the woods that morning, sat with his pipe dangling between his fingers and tapping his chair, his head bent forward, pondering the three angled drama—the eternal triangle—at that moment being staged within the narrow valley.

The click of the busy knitting needles, the muffled tapping of the pipe, fell at length into a sort of rhythm, which, with the tick of the dull-faced old clock on the mantel-shelf, seemed to enhance the silence rather than disturb it, and to bring out the peace and repose of the room.

Meanwhile, the three riders leisurely followed the eccentric windings of the Eagle Hollow Road. Seen through the tangle of vine and bush and tree in teasing glimpses on their left, the erratic little stream that inflicted on the road its many turnings, sparkled by in the sunlight. On their right, across a picturesque rail fence, rose the wooded bluffs that led to the uplands of the Warhope homestead.

Cleared only to the width of a wagon, so nar-

row that the bordering bushes sometimes raked their stirrups, the road itself was a thing to invite the wood fairies. It lay for the most part in checkered shade, the feet of the horses playing almost constantly among a delicate tracery of leaf and branch and stem, flung down by the sun in dancing patches upon the grassy track. The great trees of the bluffs reached their giant arms over it and hovered it in grateful shade, while cliff and scar unwound their successive pictures as the three rode along.

More than a mile up the hollow the road passed under the far-flung branches of an immense oak, towering so high above its fellows that the preacher reined in Rex and exclaimed;

"Grand! Magnificent! Surely its fellow is not to be found in the forest!"

"Eagle Oak," the girl observed, reining up Brownie by the side of the taller horse, "the king of the Flatwoods."

"It b'longs to the homestead," she went on. "The line runs right along here at the base of the bluff—that's the line-fence there. Black Rock and Eagle Oak, they're both on the homestead. Jack's—father had the original patent, 'r whatever they call it, made out t' his gran'-

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father, and signed by General Andrew Jackson himself. They say—”

The woodsman fidgeted in his saddle; glanced around at her from under the edges of his eyes. She caught the look and paused.

“Ah, it must be fine to have such a holding as that,” the preacher commented. “I confess to some such longings myself, sometimes.”

The remark not seeming to call for an answer, the girl merely shook the reins on Brownie’s neck and they rode on—out from the shade of the great oak; up the narrow ribbon of road, with the picturesquely broken valley unfolding its wonders; the preacher constantly reminded of something he had seen in the Alps, or elsewhere in his travels, and overflowing with effusive exclamations punctuated with a laugh so loud and blarey that it fairly made his horse shy.

The preacher’s laugh was the most strikingly odd expression of his strikingly odd personality—a sort of hand-forged laugh that did not seem to come into existence naturally; a kind of sarcastic exclamation point that exploded at untimely and most unexpected intervals in his conversation.

As they passed the spot where the sadly winsome face of the mountain girl had flared forth from the copse that morning and he had picked up Uncle Nick's trail, Jack Warhope, sitting his horse as only a man trained to the saddle can and riding for the most part in silence, darted a quick look into the bushes—a look that quite escaped the others.

The one girl and the two men—a combination of infinite possibilities—had reached the point where the road left the hollow and picked its way through the broken passes of the bluffs to the uplands, when the preacher stopped his horse and sat gazing up and across the narrow valley.

“How picturesquely that cabin nestles there in the pocket of the hills.”

“A man named Belden, and his sister, lives there,” the girl said, following the direction of his upraised arm. “They’re Kentucky mountain folks that jist moved in—they say the sister’s quite pretty.”

The preacher seemed to be studying the place, with its wild wealth of nature about it, his eyes straying at length from the cabin to its tumbled setting of cliffs and down along the opposite

bluffs, mantled with half-sprung leaves, abloom with haw and dogwood and wild apple, until, as he twisted around in the saddle, the whole beautiful panorama of the narrow valley had passed in review before him back to the winding road by which they had entered.

As the girl followed his roving eyes, a black dead limb at the top of Eagle Oak, towering high above the quickening foliage, came into view. She raised her arm and pointed up and away to the lofty landmark.

"That's where the big gray eagle's be'n comin' every summer—sence white men first come t' the Flatwoods, I guess. Look—jist over the top o' that scrub poplar, stickin' up ag'inst that white cloud."

"I see it!" the man of books exclaimed, the simple gesture of pointing to the distant landmark revealing the native grace that might still have been his but for the stooped and studious air that life had imposed upon him. "It stands out against the fluffy whiteness plain as a flag-staff."

"Nobody in the Flatwoods would think of harmin'—"

She stopped, with a low exclamation, for the

woodsman had suddenly straightened in his saddle and had jerked his hand toward the cabin squatting against the bluffs up the hollow. The others followed the motion of his hand and sat staring.

Loge Belden's sister had appeared from behind the cabin and was running toward them. She had nearly reached the bushes that fringed what might be called the front of the yard, when Belden appeared in the open door. He threw up his hand and called out a word or two, which did not quite carry to the three riders.

The mountain girl stopped and hesitated; turned and went slowly back. Belden stood aside; she entered the door; Belden closed it.

Jack was watching the preacher. He saw his quick grip on the bridle rein; saw him stiffen in the saddle and glance uneasily about.

"Astonishing! Quite extraordinary!" escaped him as the tense brief drama closed.

"Mercy!" Texie exclaimed, "I never knowed she was—crazy."

"She ain't," the woodsman muttered.

The preacher glanced around at him; threw up his head and exploded his blarey laugh. It

was a queer moment for a laugh, and a queer laugh for the moment.

"Not bad philosophy, that," he said. "People are not always as crazy as they—act."

That the preacher was acting the woodsman fully believed, but the acting was just a shade overdone—a circumstance that could hardly escape such a man as Jack Warhope, particularly after the chance clues that had first set his suspicions going. Why he was acting and what part, the woodsman was not missing any chances to find out.

The three riders sat for some time looking toward the cabin in the pocket, Texie and the preacher discussing the astonishing drama that had flared up for its tense moment in the elbow of the hills.

But the drama evidently had but one act, and that act was closed. It seemed to the woodsman, as he covertly watched the preacher, lolling with overdone awkwardness in his saddle, that he showed just a shade of relief that it *was* closed.

The sun, a red warrior on the homeward trail, had journeyed far down the paling fastnesses of the sky; had ducked behind a huge cloud

bank piled like a breastworks across the west. Presently, finding a loop-hole in the turreted cumuli, he glared back at the pursuing shadows; launched a shaft that fell spent and quivering upon Eagle Run and shivered into glittering splinters upon the rifle.

Glum at the missped shaft, the red warrior took his eye from the loop-hole; drew farther back behind the massed fortifications; unstrung his bow. The pursuing shadows stole down the bluffs; dulled the water; dimmed the woods; waked the breeze and shook the wild apple twigs till the white blossoms snowed the grass—symbol of the hopes of men, that bloom, promise fruit, die.

The girl noticed the shadows. Her eyes left the cabin; glanced up and down the opposite bluff, where, under the brow of the wooded escarpment, objects were already beginning to dim.

Her roving glance stopped at a black walnut tree ten or fifteen yards away, where some frost-blasted walnuts of the season before still clung to a blighted limb. She swept a finger toward them, dropped her hand to the revolver at her belt and looked around at the woodsman. He

caught the challenge in her eye, grinned and nodded.

With a quickness and skill that showed her mastery of the weapon, she plucked the revolver from its holster, raised it and fired. The first bullet cut a twig close to a walnut, the second brought one down.

Every horse there had been trained to stand under gun-fire. Rex merely pointed his ears sharply forward and stood to his tracks, but, even with such a firm saddle under him, the preacher flinched so at the first shot that he almost lost his balance. The second brought an effusive exclamation from him.

The slow eyes of the woodsman livened.

"Good!" he cried. "Ther' ain't another girl in the Flatwoods can do that."

With a little wisp of a smile in her eyes she glanced around at him, and turned to the preacher.

"Now, Mr. Hopkins, you can try y'ur new six-gun."

The preacher almost set up a breeze in the little valley with the gesticulations of his expressive hands; made a heavy draft on his ample stock of effusive exclamations, and

finally fumbled the ivory-handled six-gun out of its holster.

He committed the blunder of cocking it with both thumbs—a bit of overacting that did not escape the man backing Graylock in apparent stolidness.

After a deal of coaching from Texie, the preacher poked the revolver forward and pulled the trigger. There was nothing to indicate that the bullet even came near the target. He threw his head back and exploded his raucous laugh. Rex had stood firm under the shot; he shied at the laugh.

The preacher brought the horse back alongside of Brownie and fired again—the bullet smacked somewhere against the opposite bluff, but apparently did not even *fan* a walnut. He studied the revolver a moment, fixed his spectacles tighter on his nose, and settled seriously to the task; held the weapon in both hands, and aimed a long time—result the same.

Then the girl threw up her revolver and fired again. The bullet cut a nick in the rotted outer hull of a walnut, and she turned to the woodsman.

“Now, Jack, it’s your turn.”

"Aw, I couldn't hit one of 'em."

"Come on," she coaxed, "I ain't seen y'u shoot none since—let's see—'way b'fore corn plantin'."

He looked at her curiously, and shifted in his saddle. The preacher had half turned and watched him narrowly.

Suddenly the revolver leaped from the woodsman's side and darted about over the blighted limb. Three shots rang out; three walnuts flew into fragments and crumbled down upon the leaves.

The preacher had straightened in the saddle and sat watching the wonderful marksmanship with an eye that suddenly kindled to flint and flame; but as the third walnut shattered to dust and crumbs, the stoop came back to his shoulders, the air of tired studiousness to his face.

The girl turned to the woodsman, her fine eyes alive.

"You could 'a' got three more!"

The light in the brown eyes kindled a response in the gray; a slow smile crawled across his bold features.

"It's ag'in' the law o' woods t' be caught with an empty gun," he said, with a seriousness that

set her wondering, as he felt for the powder flask and bullets in his pouch.

In the dusk of the evening, as they rode back to the village, the girl stopped her horse in front of the old cabin, deserted and gloomy, that squatted against the side-hill a few yards back from the Eagle Hollow Road—the uncanny hovel that the woodsman had gazed down upon from the top of the bluff that morning while watching the swallows dart in and out of its ruined chimney.

“That place is enough to give one the—creeps,” was the preacher’s comment as he reined in Rex beside Brownie.

The girl turned in her saddle and sat for some time looking the place over—the gate now long unused, its hinges black with rust; the rank weeds and sprouts growing close up to the sagging door; the single small front window now yellow with clay that the rains had washed from between the logs; the rude clapboards of the roof warped, loosened, displaced—the crumbling remnants of what had once been a home, now desolate and forsaken under its somber canopy of trees.

“It’s the cabin of dead Henry Spencer,” she

said, "where he murdered his wife and infant daughter with 'is ax one bitter cold night when 'e was drunk, and then wandered out and froze t' death in the snow."

"I've heard the story—from your—ah—brother—and so this is the place?"

"This is the place."

"But not all the story—"

He glanced around at her quizzically.

"No, not all"—she spoke slowly; her words half a question—"they say he—comes back."

The preacher's teeth gleamed white through his heavily bearded lips; his sarcastic exclamation point of a laugh jarred the silence of the placid valley.

"Why, Miss Texie, this is the nineteenth century, not the fourteenth."

"Yes,"—in red embarrassment—"but that's what they say."

He looked around at her again, with that same half-cynical expression that came so easily to his face, as he gathered up the reins.

With the mountain girl's hurried warning still fresh in his mind, the woodsman glanced covertly about him as they rode on—something he had been constantly doing since first entering

the hollow. As he did so, the uncanny cabin happened to come again under his eyes. A sight met them that for the instant shook even his iron composure—a face at the window was peering at them through the clay-smudged pane.

The face ducked out of sight, and, without so much as a flick of the bridle rein—precisely as if he had seen nothing at all—the woodsman rode on. He glanced at the preacher, but apparently he had not seen the face. If he had he gave no sign.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SCRAPE OF A MATCH

WHILE grooming Graylock in his stall that evening Jack Warhope thought of the face that had appeared for its startling instant at the smudged window of Henry Spencer's unhallowed cabin. As a matter of fact, he had *been* thinking of it ever since riding out of the jaws of the hollow.

He hung up the curry comb and stepped to the barn door. The sun glared red through a slit in the cloud-bank, and still cleared the trees on the distant foot-hills by a yard—enough for the purpose he contemplated.

A moment later he was climbing the rough path that led to the uplands. Pausing, crouched and still, on the brink of the bluff, he spared an instant to study the premises of the red-roofed cottage, another to search critically the woods in every direction, and then stole away toward

the ill-reputed cabin of the dead woodchopper.

The sun just edged the tree-tops when he came opposite the place. Down in the bottom of the hollow the shadows lay heavy, but the light still touched the uncanny hovel squatted against the hillside.

Stealing down through the bushes and brambles, he crept up to the place under cover of the fallen oak, with its festoons of wild cucumber vines. Near the corner most densely hidden by the vines a chink had dropped out from between the logs, leaving a narrow crevice. Shading his eyes, he peeped within. The cabin was empty.

Hugging the wall closely, he crept around to the sagging door; softly pushed it open. His eyes lifted at what he saw—an old box on end near what had once been the fireplace; an empty whisky bottle on the box, with a lamp standing beside it ready to light; a blanket ready to hang over the smudged window.

The dusty floor was covered with tracks—man tracks—one man's. Stepping so as carefully to set his feet in the tracks, he entered the cabin and closed the door.

The tracks had been made by a boot much worn and frayed. The man that made them must have been large and heavy, for his boot heel had dented deep into the floor boards, and the length of his stride indicated him to be little, if any, under six feet. The profusion of tracks, together with a number of half-burned matches scattered about the floor, indicated that he had been there some time—possibly several times.

The woodsman found himself wondering what manner of man he could have been, and what his purpose. And why did he bring a lamp instead of a candle? Lamps were none too plenty in the Flatwoods. Again there came over him that strangely disquieting premonition of danger—intangible; indefinable; deadly deliberate.

Everything pointed to the conclusion that the cabin's unknown visitor would come again—probably with the night. The lamp on the box, the blanket ready to hang over the window, were not without a purpose. What that purpose might prove to be could only be conjectured—possibly horse stealing. But no, or why a lamp instead of a candle?

He glanced up at the loft—except for a few

boards lying loose and scattered about upon the joists, the cabin was open to the roof; he looked around into the dim far corner back of the door—it was half filled with a clutter of rubbish, broken boxes and the like—but no tracks led that way.

Using the greatest care to conceal his footprints, he opened the door, stepped cautiously out, closed it, and, after a critical look about the surrounding weeds and bushes, slipped away up the side of the timbered bluff, through the woods and back to his unfinished chores.

After a hasty supper, he drew out his revolver; bent over it a brief but thoroughly competent instant of inspection by the candle; tried the trigger-pull; twirled the cylinder; dropped it back in the holster; blew out the candle and laid his hand to the door-latch. The warning of the mountain girl crossed his mind—he turned back; closed the hearth of the cook stove to hide its light; opened the door softly and stepped out into the gathering night.

He went straight to the path that led up the steep face of the cliff, paused a moment at the brink to sound the woods as before, and slipped away among the trees toward the dead wood-chopper's cabin.

The cloud-bank had dissolved in the west when he again reached the ill-omened hovel and the sky was hanging out its stars—the big ones already out, and the little ones coming.

He again crept down the wooded face of the bluff and, under cover of the fallen oak, festooned with the wild cucumber vines, stole up to the chink in the wall and peeped between the logs. The interior was far too dim to make out objects with any distinctness, but the cabin was apparently empty of its unknown intruder.

After listening intently for some time he again stole around the wall to the door, pushed it slowly open and entered. As soon as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he saw that the room was just as he had left it a few hours earlier.

Not daring to venture out on the floor, the light being too dim again to risk hiding his trail by stepping in the tracks, he reached up, caught one of the joists, and, swinging from hand to hand, crossed to the far corner of the room; concealed himself behind the old boards and boxes of the rubbish heap and sat gripping his sore shoulder—the exertion had opened the gash, and he could feel the blood crawling down his side.

There is something depressing, fearsome, about entering an old deserted house—especially after nightfall. All sorts of fancies arise about the people who may have tenanted there—how they lived, loved, died—particularly how they died, whether peacefully or by violence or by the unhallowed self-inflicted stroke—that most of all. And this was the cabin of dead Henry Spencer. Few flatwoodsmen would care to go near it—much less into it—at such an hour.

Jack watched the last faint light from the west die out in the smudged window—so foul with clay that he had not been able to make out more than the bare outline of the face that had peered through it a few hours before. He knew the bats were darting about in the cabin, for the dark was alive with the click of their teeth. A screech owl shivered his lonesome wail from an upstanding branch of the fallen oak.

The woodsman half started, listened closely, smiled. The sound was genuine—it *was* a screech owl.

The low wash of Eagle Run, lapping the rocks in its shallow bed, came up across the lonely road; the melancholy note of a whip-poor-will carried down out of the woods.

Another sound fell upon the night—the low

swish of weeds in the yard—and the woodsman grew tense and strained. There followed a guarded footfall; a hand fumbled over the door. It opened; a heavy step creaked the sagging floor; a form bulked huge and black in the gloom; a hand and arm passed across the window and hung the blanket into place.

A match scraped—one of the old-fashioned kind that sputter a while before making much light—the chimney of the lamp was raised; the match laid to the wick. Out of the dark flared the powerful form and truculent face of—Black Bogus.

The woodsman watched his every move. After a somewhat close study of the tracked floor, he went around on the other side of the lamp to the ruined hearth, lifted up a loosened slab of stone and felt under it.

Apparently what he expected to find was not there, for he swore, put the slab back, rose and slouched across the floor toward the rubbish heap. The man hiding behind it crouched still as one of the cabin logs and fingered the pistol butt at his hip. But the ruffian only rummaged out an old box, carried it back to the light and sat down.

Drawing a short pipe from his pocket, he

filled it from a grimy tobacco sack, lighted it with another of the sputtering matches, lounged against the larger box that supported the lamp and, with the air of a man quite at his ease, began to smoke.

As he smoked, the bitter lines of his face relaxed a trifle, and its half-haunting resemblance to a face that dwelt—and would ever dwell—in his memory again stole across the mind of the watcher.

But Black Bogus had not smoked long until it became apparent that he was anything but a man at his ease. Every sound outside received his strained attention, and when not listening, he smoked viciously.

At last he shuffled himself erect, felt of his elbow where it had rested heavily upon the larger box, knocked the ashes from his pipe, dropped an arm across his knee, bent forward and seemed lost in thought.

Shifting his pose after a time, he straightened, put away his pipe, reached into the inside pocket of his faded coat and drew out a thick bunch of greenbacks—a handful of bills that appeared to be an assortment of tens and twenties.

The woodsman guardedly shifted his position so as to get a better look. As he did so, his knee accidentally jostled the rubbish heap.

With an oath Black Bogus chucked the money back into his pocket and leaped at one bound into a corner out of range with the window, a heavy revolver balanced in his hand, his eyes sweeping every nook and cranny from which the alarming sound might have come.

At that tense instant a bat, darting about under the rafters, blinded by the light, dashed itself against the cabin gable and fell almost at the desperado's feet.

"Damn the thing!" he growled, placing his foot upon the half-stunned creature and grinding it to death, at the same time thrusting the heavy revolver into his pocket and turning back to the light.

The incident apparently called for another smoke. He slouched down on the smaller box; found his pipe; took the money out of his pocket again and began a close inspection of each bill, one by one. Ten of the bills—the ones that appeared to the man watching him to be the newest—he laid out upon the box. The others he put back in his pocket.

Then an astonishing thing happened to the ten new bills. He put away his pipe; took from his greasy, wrinkled trousers a plug of tobacco and snipped off a chew with his powerful teeth; drew from the side pocket of his coat half a handful of what looked to be the ordinary black soil of rotted leaf mold; moistened it very slightly with tobacco juice; rubbed a little of it on each bill and scoured them between his hands, rumpling and crumpling them in every conceivable way. He rolled the corners between his fingers and thumbs; bent the corners down; twisted and scoured the bills as if he would wear them out.

It soon appeared that to wear them was the very thing he was attempting to do, for as he worked them and broke them in his powerful hands, they lost their newness and took on the look of bills that had been long in circulation. He was making old money out of new. Light began to dawn on the man watching him.

An hour or more he spent at the task. When at last it appeared to be finished to his satisfaction, he took the other bills out of his pocket—some that had probably been similarly treated on some previous occasion, likely by that same

lamp—put the ten newly treated bills among them and again examined them all close to the light, bill by bill.

They appeared to pass the very painstaking and critical inspection, for, with a satisfied grunt, he replaced them in his coat; scraped up from the box where he had placed it all that he could get of the remaining leaf mold, put it back in his pocket and blew the rest away; picked up his pipe, prodded down its contents with a grimy finger, relighted it and smoked nervously.

Another hour or more he smoked and fidgeted; finally turned the lamp low; strode to the door, opened it a narrow slit and peeped out.

But apparently enough of the night had not gone for whatever purpose he had in mind, for, with a muttered grunt, he closed the door; strode impatiently back and forth across the floor a time or two; slouched down upon the box and, without turning up the light, again hunted his pipe.

It must have been well toward midnight, and the cramped position of the man behind the rubbish heap had grown almost unbearable,

when, after many peeps through the narrow slit at the door, Black Bogus blew out the light and very softly slipped out of the cabin.

The woodsman rose, listened to the low swish of Black Bogus's receding steps among the weeds until there came the creak of the rails as he climbed the fence into the Eagle Hollow Road. Opening the door with the utmost caution, Jack slipped out and stood listening—the steps had turned down the road toward the village. He closed the door and followed.

He had not shadowed the renegade far until it became plainly evident that he was a very indifferent woodsman. Sticks snapped under his feet, bushes slapped back into place as he brushed against them, and once or twice his boot struck the ground with a clumsy thud. Clear down to the mouth of the hollow Jack stalked him. He took the path that led along the east bank of the stream, and, when he came to the fork, followed the branch that led to the little park.

The woodsman stole after him, taking the path himself this time and grinning dryly at the compliment he had paid the fellow the night before in thinking he might notice the croaking

of the frogs. It was a refinement of woodcraft of which Black Bogus had probably never dreamed.

Down into the little park and to the seat at Whispering Spring the hulking shadow crept; again, as on the night before, the man crouched down among the gnarled maple roots by the rustic seat.

The windows of the red-roofed cottage were dark. The place lay serene and peaceful, with no spark of light alive to show that it was awake to the sinister web of evil slowly weaving about it.

After an interval spent in listening, the crouched figure among the gnarled maple roots lifted his hands to his mouth and again the lonesome wail of the screech owl shivered out upon the night. The woodsman seized the favorable moment to steal closer and to conceal himself in a clump of shrubbery much nearer than he had ventured the night before.

Black Bogus had given his rather clever imitation of the screech owl three times, and was on the point of giving it again, when the parlor door opened and the tall figure of the preacher, without his glasses and with the stoop gone from

his shoulders, came out on the porch. With a step that carried no suggestion of mincing nervousness he came down across the yard. The white butt of the six-gun at his side looked as if it belonged there.

He went straight to the spring; took down the dipper, making a very obvious amount of clatter in doing so; dipped himself a drink; hung up the dipper; turned back toward the house; stopped by the rustic seat, and held out his hand.

Black Bogus reached in the breast of his coat, drew out a package, the bunch of bills without a doubt—and laid it in the waiting hand. The preacher put it inside his shirt bosom; turned away; hesitated; came back a step.

“Bogus.”

The man crouched by the seat grunted.

“Be ready any night now,”—the hurried tones barely carried to the man hidden in the shrubbery—“there’s a barrel o’ money in there. I wouldn’t ’a’ believed any man would risk so much about ’im, and that old, out o’ date safe—a horse jockey could open it. It’s all right slip-pin’ the goats”—he patted his breast—“in among the sheep like we’re doin’; and it’s

lucky we printed a-plenty down the river off o' them new plates; and that was a great idea of mine—mussin' 'em up in leaf mold dampened with tobacco spit so's they'd look like old bills. The devil 'imself couldn't tell 'em.

"It works, and we'd carry it through, only for one thing—Warhope! He's suspicious. I saw it that first evening at the supper table. That's why I went on that fool seinin' spree—t' throw 'im off; and that's why I couldn't leave no notes under the slab at the old cabin as we'd planned. Where he got his clue I don't know, but he's got it. I had the devil's own time blindin' them hawk eyes of his this afternoon.

"Warhope!—and t' think Loge had 'im right at the point of a six-gun and let 'im beat 'im on the draw."

"An' me—had 'im at the point of a knife there in the schoolhouse," the man among the maple roots broke in—"why didn't y'u let me alone?"

The other whirled on him, and his voice thickened.

"Let y'u alone—after y'u bungled it the way y'u did—with fifty pistols in the air—and you drunk—hell! This was my lay, anyhow, and a one-man job, only you and Loge had t' mess in

—and now, with y’ur long tongues and squirrel whisky, y’u’ve jim’d it.”

“Mess in!” The shadow among the gnarled roots raised a trifle. “Who hid y’u an’ nursed y’u back well again after that marshal dern’ nigh croaked y’u last winter? Mess in—!”

The other strode a hard step nearer; apparently realized that any sort of an outbreak just there and then might prove dangerous; finally turned and stalked away up the yard.

The parlor door opened, closed. Black Bogus half rose, slipped away up the path—and the woodsman was alone with the voices of the night.

CHAPTER XX

A CRY IN THE NIGHT

COUNTERFEITERS—the mystery was cleared. Simon Colin—money-lender; money-hoarder—offered just the right opportunity.

Their plan was absolutely flawless—each night to slip out a number of good bills and replace them with counterfeit bills of the same denomination. And the rumpling of the spurious bills in tobacco-stained leaf mold to make them appear old and worn, so practically eliminating the chances of detection—it was a master thought.

Crouched in the shrubbery, the woodsman pondered the revelations of the night. But what to do? Plan after plan flashed through his mind, strung tense by what he had heard. Proof—it was the one big word that confronted him. Since they had printed their supply of counterfeit bills before coming to the Flat-

woods, there would be no outfit—nothing that fire could not destroy.

A thought of the concealed house-boat, with the shapely heelprints on its dusty after deck, crossed him; and assumed a new significance. But one false move and even that would disappear—and they had their eyes on him.

But with all the caution of his woodcraft, Jack Warhope was not a man to plan and scheme. He came of other stock than that. A stroke to the core—when the ripe instant came—and devil take the chips, was his way. A bold thought took shape in his musings; tightened his hands; narrowed his eyes—but the ripe instant had not yet come. Another night would bring it, with the banker warned and both of them on guard.

With a grim look on his face he crawled out of the shrubbery, stole back to the path winding along under the dense shadows at the base of Black Rock and slipped through the corner of the orchard to his own small cabin.

Pausing in the fallow yard under an old apple tree, just now renewing its youth in the glory of full bloom, he stood for a long time sifting the sounds of the night and frowning back toward the red-roofed cottage.

The moon stole up under the edge of the east and cast a glittering spear that broke against the face of Black Rock. A quiver seemed to thrill over the sleepy world at the bold assault. The geese in the barn-lot honked and clapped their wings; a bullfrog down in the bayou cleared his throat; a soft breeze waked, rustled the leaves of the old apple tree and snowed the man white with blossoms.

He lifted his shoulders; filled his lungs with the blossom-laden air; turned toward the door under the nodding sprays of the crimson rambler; had his hand on the latch;—when suddenly there rang out upon the silence of the night, from the direction of the red-roofed cottage, a woman's wild scream, repeated again and again.

He whirled, rigid, striving to distinguish the cry,—but all women scream much alike. Next moment he was dashing across the orchard toward the sound—probably the most awesome on earth, a woman's wild cry in the night.

The sound had ceased when he came out of the orchard and a candle was flitting about the sitting-room. He leaped the orchard fence and ran around to the porch. To his surprise the

sitting-room door was partly open, and he dashed in.

There in his big armchair in the room that served as office, half bent back over the chair-arm, his grizzled head lolling down horribly, sprawled the old money-lender—dead.

Texie was crying wildly in the arms of the housekeeper. The preacher had just come from the parlor bedroom and stood stooped and trembling, peering through his huge spectacles in awed silence. But great as his haste in dressing must have been, he had found time to put on the frock coat and high neck stock—demands of custom that he had probably found impossible to deny.

Jack found the dead man still warm. He noticed that his night shirt was torn to shreds at the neck and sleeves, and that his face was scratched and streaked with blood, but there was no wound apparent that could have caused his death.

The room presented every evidence of a struggle. A chair was overturned; the cover on a small stand had been brushed away; the rug was dragged back a foot or two from before the dead banker's writing desk, where, for an in-

stant the woodsman bent a searching eye upon some faint markings that, in the dim candle-light, could just barely be traced upon the dusty floor-boards thus laid bare.

The old man's sawed off shotgun was lying on the floor, where it had probably been wrenched from his hand before he could use it.

Jack had only time to note these particulars when a rabble of people from the village, alarmed by Texie's screams, came running up the yard and stormed into the house. A moment later Jerry Brown, the town marshal, bustled in and took charge—and the peaceful cottage passed into the hands of the law.

With rather more pompous abruptness than the occasion warranted, perhaps, the house was cleared of all but the preacher, the woodsman and two or three women, a messenger sent to the city for the coroner, and a deputy put on guard at the door pending his arrival.

Seventy years ago the coroner's office was in the saddle, the coroner, then as now, always a physician, usually of the "saddle-bags" type, a race of men staunch and true, who, next to the minister and teacher, did most to nurse the young republic to manhood.

Early the next morning the coroner arrived, a gruff, hale man past middle age, rough on the outside, kind as sunshine within. After a short consultation with Jerry Brown, he scribbled a sentence or two in a ragged and much worn old pocket note-book, entered the room where the tragedy had occurred and began his inquest—a man who knew little law and had scant precedent to follow, who relied on his own judgment and stood ready to back his decisions to the death.

Half the village had assembled in the yard, with as many in the house as it would hold. But, aside from the disarranged furniture, the torn garment, the scratches on the face, there was little evidence, and no clue whatever to the person or persons with whom the old man had waged his fatal battle in the dark. Not a cent of money, or any article of value, had been taken. The safe was still locked, apparently just as it had been left the day before.

Texie was the first witness called. Her voice low and shaken, she testified that she had heard a struggle, and words strained and muffled and indistinct—that she immediately sprang out of bed and ran into the housekeeper's room—that

they lighted a candle and hurried down-stairs—that there was no one else in the room except her father, and he lay back across the chair-arm—

Her voice choked into silence.

“Did you hear any one running from the room as you came down-stairs?” the coroner questioned after a considerate pause.

“I did not.”

“Were the windows all down?”

“I think so.”

“Were the doors all closed?”

“All but the door of the settin’-room—it was open a little bit.”

“Was it closed when you went to bed?”

“I s’pose so—father never failed to shut and lock it.”

“Was there more than one key t’ the door?”

“No, only one.”

“Where was it kep’?”

“Hangin’ b’hind the door.”

“Marshal,” directed the coroner, “will you see if that key is still hangin’ there?”

The marshal peeped behind the door.

“Yes, it’s thar yit, Y’ur Honor,” he answered, with as much pompous importance as if an-

nouncing the discovery of the pivotal clue in the case.

The coroner relaxed his gruff severity long enough to offer the weeping girl a word of kindly sympathy, and then dismissed her.

The housekeeper was next called. Her testimony agreed in every particular with Texie's.

And then came the preacher. In his peering, jerky way, he testified that he was a heavy sleeper—that he had heard nothing till Miss Texie screamed—that he had then hastily thrown on the few articles of dress necessary to make himself presentable before ladies—that he had opened his door and hurried across the parlor, across the sitting-room and into the office, where he was horrified to find his dear friend dead, and the room in its present disarray.

"Is it true that you carry a key to the parlor door?"

"It is. Brother Colin placed it at my disposal the evening I came."

"Where is it?"

"Here."

He drew it forth and held it toward the coroner, who waved it away.

"Did you lock the parlor door las' night?"

"I did."

"You're excused."

The coroner looked in his note-book, glanced into the corner of the room where Jack Warhope stood near Texie's chair and motioned with his hand. The woodsman approached the table; the grizzled old physician sat for some moments studying him.

"What do you know of this case?"

In his slow, careful way the woodsman told what he had heard and seen, from the moment of Texie's scream to the arrival of Jerry Brown.

"What was you doin' up so late?"

The question probed deep. Things would have happened had he answered it—and they would have happened fast. Back along the wall the preacher straightened a trifle and his eyes tightened behind the huge spectacles.

"I was—studyin'."

Just what the character of his "studies" had been he let fall no word, and fortunately the coroner did not ask. He bent his brows and sat for some time apparently weighing the story. Back along the wall the tightened eyes behind the huge spectacles relaxed.

"Is it true that you carry, and have for some time carried, a key to the kitchen door?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where was that key—las' night?"

"In my pocket."

He drew it out and held it forth; the coroner waved it away; back along the wall the eyes behind the tinted spectacles tightened again. The coroner sat drumming with his fingers and running his eyes up and down over the tall form of the woodsman.

"It appears from the evidence that you was the only person who could have entered this house las' night without breakin' in."

A thrill ran over the room and swept out into the yard.

Texie slowly rose from her chair; her eyes suddenly dry—and wide.

"Your Honor—w'y—that's Jack— Father trusted him the same as he did me—"

The coroner looked toward her; waved his hand. The girl glanced helplessly at the woodsman; sank back into the chair and buried her face in her hands.

Uncle Nick had edged through the crowd and approached the table.

"Doc, Y'ur Honor, he never done it. He couldn't. Hit ain't in 'im—n'r the men 'e sprung from. W'y, I'd back the boy with my life."

The coroner looked at him; turned again to the woodsman.

"Your name's Warhope?"

"Yes, sir."

"Son of Colonel David Warhope?"

"Yes, sir."

The coroner mused a moment; went on.

"I knowed your father, and I don't believe it has ever been my privilege t' know a nobler man or a finer gentleman."

He turned to Uncle Nick, anxiously fumbling the coonskin cap in his fingers.

"You say you'd be willin' to answer for this boy's honesty with your life?"

"I would that."

"So would I." He turned to the woodsman: "Young man, you're excused."

Tense strung bodies relaxed; faces cleared; a murmur swept the crowd—a murmur that, only for the presence of the dead, would have swelled to a cheer. The coroner raised his hand; the crowd grew silent.

After writing a hasty line or two in his worn

note-book, the coroner rose in grim severity and rendered his verdict—to the effect that Simon Colin came to his death from an acute attack of apoplexy, preceptitated by struggling with some person, or persons, unknown, who had entered the house probably with intent to rob.

Looking around over the assembled villagers, a man seriously conscious of the trust the state had committed to him, the coroner folded up his note-book, came out from behind the table—and the inquest was over.

The crowd was sent away; the woodsman helped Jerry Brown and the coroner carry the dead man into his room and lay him upon his bed.

Watching a chance when no one was looking, Jack snatched up the sawed off shotgun and hurriedly examined the caps on the tubes. He found what he was looking for—the fulminate had been removed from the caps, rendering them absolutely neutral. No amount of hammering could have caused them to explode.

Crossing the floor, he took down the key, which the marshal had left hanging behind the door undisturbed, and studied it critically. On the shaft of it was a faint discoloration that could be nothing else but blood.

CHAPTER XXI

SIX-GUN PERSUASION

IN the church of which he had long been the chief support the funeral of the dead money-lender was held. To his broad conception of a Christian's financial obligation the fact was primarily due that this little church, in an out-of-the-way village, was able to exist at all.

In spite of his somewhat grasping and domineering ways, the rugged worth of the man, to say nothing of his wealth, had made him widely known. Now joined to this was the mystery of his death. People came from far and near, and the church was packed, while many were forced to remain outside, grouped about the open door and windows.

The Reverend Caleb Hopkins officiated.

It was the first time the Flatwoods had heard him preach, because of the fact that the day before, though Sunday, the church had re-

mained closed out of respect for its leading member, sleeping his last sleep at the red-roofed cottage.

Standing well back among the silent group at the door, Jack Warhope watched the preacher go through his ordeal. Nerve he must have had, or he never could have carried it through. Behind the piously solemn mask of his face there doubtless raged a terrific tempest, but it did not seem to retard his flow of thought or mar his oratory. Little enough can be said over a dead man, at the best, but that little he so clothed with artistry that the like of it had never been heard in the Flatwoods. Each man writes his own epitaph; Simon Colin had written his. That was the basis of his remarks. He neither eulogized nor blamed—and in that he showed the sense of a wiser man.

Most of the crowd lingered about the cemetery for a time, even after the last solemn rites had been performed, as if slow to realize that a man so prominent, so long a power in the life of the little community, had with such suddenness dropped that prominence and power for the mean and voiceless walls of the grave.

Immediately on the death of the old banker,

the preacher had, for the sake of appearances, moved to the parsonage. He had returned from the funeral and had been for some time pacing back and forth, or fidgeting restlessly in his chair, in the cool front room up-stairs—the former minister's study—when he was very much surprised to see Jack Warhope ride up on Graylock, dismount, throw the bridle rein over the hitch-rack and come striding up the yard.

He sprang from his chair, opened one of his satchels, snatched out the holster with the ivory-handled revolver sticking in it; hurriedly buckled it on under his vest, where it was concealed by the somber frock coat, and tip-toed back to his chair.

There came the sound of voices below; a firm step made the old stair creak; a knock disturbed the sanctimonious quiet of the study door.

“Come in.”

The knob turned, with a force and decision that somehow suggested the power of the hand laid upon it, and Jack Warhope entered; carefully closed the door; stood coolly looking the other over.

The preacher slowly rose from his chair;

slipped his hand down along the front of his frock coat and loosened it against his side.

The motion was not lost upon the woodsman. His eyes had narrowed to slits in his face; his lips were tightened to a straight hard line. He dropped a quick look at the preacher's feet.

"Ther' ain't another pair o' boot heels in the Flatwoods like them, Mr. — Hopkins."

The brows of the other lifted in polite surprise.

"I found the print o' them heels on the dusty floor boards there by Pap Simon's desk, where they couldn't 'a' be'n made till after the rug was drug back."

The preacher peered at him through his huge spectacles; a subtle premonition of what was coming reached him.

"I may have stepped there when I came out of my room. That was a most distressing scene, Mr. Warhope."

"But the board was scratched where the heel had slipped and dug into it under strain. How come y'u slipped?"

The affable, benevolent smile weakened; the premonition of what was coming deepened.

"Really, you must not expect me to remember

every small detail of so distressing a moment, Mr. Warhope."

"That trick of removin' the brimstone from the caps on the shotgun was what I call down-right smart. It took a good head t' think o' that. But ain't it queer that a master hand like that would unlock the door *after* the murder, instid of b'fore, and leave blood on the key?"

The studious pucker around the eyes behind the glasses was fast smoothing out, and the man was breathing fast. His hand was fumbling the lapel of the frock coat and slowly stealing down the side.

"What do you mean? You surely are not accusing *me* of the murder of my old friend?"

"I mean," rasped the woodsman, his slits of eyes on the hand stealing down the edge of the frock coat, "that night b'fore last I laid in the little park and hear'd what was said b'tween you and Black Bogus."

Like lightning the creeping hand darted under the frock coat. But quick as he was, the ivory-handled revolver was not quite out of the holster when the heavy six-gun of the woodsman leaped up and covered him.

"Butt first, Parson," came the cold, incisive command over the steady barrel.

Hopkins stood just as the gun had caught him—motionless; poised on the flat of one foot and the toes of the other; his body slightly crouched forward. Reckless though he was, a man who held the world at bay, and keen-witted as a dog fox, he slowly relaxed the pose and grudgingly handed over the revolver—the ivory butt first.

The woodsman snatched it; removed the cap from the tubes and stuck it back into the holster under the frock coat; rummaged the cap box out of the pouch beside the holster and dropped it into his own.

“And now I’ll jist trouble y’u f’r that parlor-door key.”

Hopkins scowled; whipped a black look at the steady muzzle of the six-gun; dragged the key out of his pocket and passed it over.

“No, I ain’t accusin’ you of the murder,” the woodsman went on, as cool and collected as if there had been no interruption, at the same time dropping the key into his pocket. “I’m doin’ y’u the honor t’ think y’u hain’t quite fell that low—bein’ y’u didn’t want ’is death, no-how. No, y’u wanted ’im t’ live, so’s you could slip out all the good bills y’u da’s’t every night and leave counterf’it bills in their place.

"You'd jist got through changin' the money that night when 'e rushed out on y'u. He tried t' shoot—both bar'ls—but you'd fixed the caps so's they wouldn't go off. Then foller'd the struggle, and no doubt you was bad flustered when 'e fell back acrosst the chair, dead of heart disease. Then y'u unlocked the door t' head off suspicion, but y'u *must* 'a' be'n flustered 'r y'u wouldn't 'a' left blood on the key."

Hopkins was bowed forward, staring hard through his glasses. The woodsman glanced at him.

"Ther's jist one p'int I ain't quite clear on—did 'e know it was you?"

The question caught the other off guard.

"My God, yes! Oh, his dead face there in the coffin—in the black night it's before me."

He shuddered; gripped his hands till the knuckles turned white; stiffened after a moment and pulled himself together.

The woodsman glanced out of the window, across the little park to the red-roofed cottage; suffered his eyes to stray away to where the mellow afternoon sun struck the river; turned slowly and faced the other.

"Mr. —Caleb Hopkins,"—a peculiar twist had

slid into his voice that brought a quick look from the man addressed—"I 'low y'u didn't *aim* t' kill Pap Simon, but the Flatwoods ain't big enough any more t' hold you and me both. The Milford Stage from down the river is leavin' the post-office f'r the city in a few minutes. You're goin' t' be a passenger—and y'u ain't comin' back."

Hopkins winced; involuntarily dropped his hand to the butt of his six-gun, before remembering it was useless; snapped out a muttered curse and stood glaring about him.

A grin, hard and dangerous, crawled out of the woodsman's eyes and twisted his face.

"I 'low we'll be startin'—now," he rasped.

Hopkins swore again—an artistic little run of oaths that the Flatwoods call "split hic'ry"—stamped across the floor; picked up his two satchels and brought them back to the desk.

"Empty 'em," the hard voice commanded.

"Damn'd if I will," the other snarled, his eyes like live coals in his face.

"Y'u will, 'r y'u'll face Jerry Brown—and I ain't carin' a dern which."

The other glared around; appeared to meditate some desperate move; seemed to realize

his helplessness; finally slammed the satchels on the desk with a snarl and snatched out their contents.

One of them contained some clothing and a few personal belongings; the other a number of thick bundles of money—real money; the face of Hopkins left no doubt of that very important fact.

The woodsman's eyes widened a trifle.

"Lord, Parson, y'u cut some swath—f'r a preacher! How much did y'u have when y'u struck the Flatwoods—real money?"

"Five hundred."

"I'm takin' y'ur word f'r that. Peel off that many and put the rest back."

Hopkins picked up one of the bundles; counted off bills—all tens and twenties—to the amount of five hundred dollars; and dumped the rest with the other bundles back in the satchel.

The long arm of the woodsman unexpectedly stabbed across the desk and snatched the satchel. Hopkins whirled to spring at him; faced the muzzle of the steady six-gun; flinched back.

With exasperating deliberation the woods-

man stored away the bundles of bills in the capacious pockets of his hunting blouse; snapped the satchel shut, dropped it to the floor and slid it toward the other with his foot.

"You'll go ahead o' me down-stairs," he directed, crisp and cold. "Make whatever excuse y'u please t' Mis' Mason, 'r anybody else we run on to. We'll stand out there at the hitch-rack till the stage comes along. When it does, you'll board it, jist like nothin' had happened. I'm aimin' t' trail y'u on Graylock. Make one false move, and—the next move will be mine."

He backed to the stair door, threw it open and, with a slight sweep of the revolver, stood aside.

The eyes of Hopkins behind his glasses were like the eyes of a trapped viper, but he dared not disobey the command. He put the five hundred dollars in his coat, picked up the satchel containing the clothing and personal effects, kicked the other under the desk and strode through the door. The woodsman dropped the six-gun back in its holster and followed.

Mrs. Mason was at the back of the house when they came down, so they escaped encountering her. The same good luck held at the hitch-rack,

for the stage was just pulling out from the post-office as they reached the gate. The woodsman waved his hand; the driver drew up; Hopkins stepped aboard and it rattled away.

CHAPTER XXII

TEARS OF THE MOUNTAIN GIRL

TWILIGHT had put the woods to sleep when Jack Warhope rode back to the homestead from trailing the stage. He groomed his horse, foul with sweat and sand; fed him and went straight to his cabin. Before lifting the latch he stopped a moment and, with a slow sweep of his eyes, sifted the gathering shadows.

The foot-hills away across on the plains were already hiding under the sable wings of the south; a sinuous lighter streak marked where the river rimmed the bottoms; the red flare of the spent day faintly spangled the west; the woods breathed softly; hardly a pulse stirred the apple blossoms; out of the silence came the tinkle of the spring under the cliff lapping down the sulphur-stained gutter on its way to the barn-lot and cattle pens.

He filled his lungs full of the serene evening

and laid his hand to the latch; entered the door; closed and fastened it with unusual care; drew the blinds of the two small windows and lighted his candle.

What to do with the bundles of money? A key to the dead banker's safe he did not have, even if he could have found the chance to open it and put them back. He took the thick bundles out of his blouse pockets, and began to count them. They totaled exactly three thousand five hundred eighty dollars—one hundred seven twenties and one hundred forty-four tens. The woodsman's eyes lifted at the amount. Such a sum in five nights—it showed what Hopkins might have done in time.

But what to do with it?—the man bent his brows over the problem. It is only just to him—and the blood that was in him—to state that it never so much as crossed him that he might keep it, with probably nobody ever the wiser.

It was too late to take it back to the red-roofed cottage that night, and too bulky to carry in his pockets. Deciding at last to hide it until next day gave him a chance to take Texie into his confidence, he wrapped the bundles in a

towel; raised the rug; very carefully loosened a board of the floor; hid the package under it; replaced the board and rolled the rug back into place with studied exactness.

Then he built a fire and prepared a hasty supper, which he ate in deep thoughtfulness; put the few dishes away; blew out the candle; raised the blinds of the two small windows and slipped out into the yard.

Twilight had long faded into dark. Only an occasional candle picked out the ragged outline of the village. A dog fox back in the hills was trying to tell the rest of the foxes how lonesome he was. Over along Eagle Run the frogs croaked—without interruption. He listened to make sure.

Glancing back at the cabin door to make certain he had closed it, he slipped across the corner of the orchard; along the path at the base of Black Rock; into the little park and stole in under a dense clump of syringa bushes barely three steps from the rustic seat at Whispering Spring.

For those who know how to listen, nature has a thousand voices—and the woods never sound a false note. A good length of the night was

gone when the frogs along Eagle Run gave him the cue he was expecting. He could trace the progress of the renegade down the stream—doubtless fresh from his task of making old money out of new at the deserted cabin—as well as if he had his eyes upon him.

Presently there came the very faint creak of a rail where the path crossed the fence out of the fallow pasture lot into the little park. A moment later a hulking form bulked huge in the gloom; Black Bogus stole out of the shadows and crouched down among the gnarled maple roots at the end of the rustic seat.

The woodsman lay so close that he could hear him breathe. After listening intently for some minutes, the hulking renegade raised his hands to his mouth and gave the call of the screech owl. Jack found out what he wanted to know—Hopkins had not had the chance to communicate with his confederates.

Again and again Black Bogus repeated his call, at intervals of a few minutes, until he had given it a dozen or fifteen times, each time growing more restless and disturbed. At last he began to swear, and the call began to resemble less and less the plaintive wail of the bird he

mocked. Finally he rose, listened a moment, and, with no very great effort at concealment, stalked muttering up the path.

The woodsman rose and softly followed; shadowed him up the branch and into the mouth of the hollow. At the squalid hovel of dead Henry Spencer he vaulted the fence, stalked up the yard and pushed open the sagging door.

Stepping noiselessly around through the bushes, the woodsman crept up to the chink between the logs under the festoon of wild cucumber vines. He was just in time to see Black Bogus light the lamp, go to the ruined fireplace, lift up the slab of stone on the hearth and feel under it. Nothing there—he slammed the stone back, kicked it with his ragged boot, snatched out his pipe, lit it viciously, smoked hard for a minute or more, blew out the lamp, stormed out of the door and down the yard.

All the way up Eagle Hollow Road and to Loge Belden's cabin the woodsman shadowed him; watched him go around to the back; heard him enter and slam the door after him; slipped up to the small east window and lay listening. The window was open a scant inch or so at the

bottom; he guardedly raised himself even with the narrow opening and cautiously peeped within.

A match scraped, was laid to a candle on a shelf over the crumbling fireplace; Black Bogus whipped off the charred end of the wick; it flared to full strength and the interior of the cabin came out of the dark.

The watcher's eyes lifted in amazement. The cabin was almost totally bare of furniture of any kind—no beds; no table or chairs—merely some pots and pans by the empty fireplace, and two pallets on the floor.

On one of these pallets, almost under the window, lay Belden's sister; on the other lay Loge. He raised up on his elbow as the candle flared alight; noticed the sullen glower on the face of his associate.

"Well?"

"He didn't come out."

"Hell!—an' y'u had t' bring it back?"

"What else?"

There came a voice from the pallet under the window—a voice soft and mild, shaken and half afraid, the listener fancied.

"Didn't 'e send no word t'—me?"

"Didn't come out, I tell y'u."

The woodsman had caught the appeal in the soft tones; wondered what could be the relation between the girl and such a man as Hopkins. Then he recalled her reference to "the third man" that startled moment in the bushes by the side of the road; remembered her running down the yard toward them on the evening of the ride; and he brought his eyes as close to the slit under the sash as he dared. After a short pause, during which he fancied she might be gathering resolution for another question, the soft voice came again, more faltering than before:

"An' ther' wusn't nothin' under the rock—no note n'r nothin'—?"

"Not a damn' scrap."

The face under the window turned to the wall. Loge dropped back to the pallet. Black Bogus drew the unoffending bills from his pocket and slammed them down on the shelf; unbuckled his holster and put the revolver under his shirt; blew out the candle and pitched down beside Belden.

The man crouched on the outside of the window pondered what he had seen and heard.

He had looked eagerly for the outfit with which they made their spurious money—that was the one big reason, in fact, that had brought him. He saw no trace of it—the hint dropped by Hopkins in the little park that they had printed a plentiful supply before coming up the river was doubtless true, and that meant practically the absence of any very substantial proof.

He recalled what Hopkins had told Black Bogus about the large amount of money still in the safe at the red-roofed cottage—unguarded, as they would now suppose. They would be almost certain to make some attempt to get it. When they did—

But they were certain not to make the attempt till they learned that Hopkins was gone. Until then all was safe.

In his brief glance over the interior of the cabin, the woodsman was struck by the fact that the place was neat and clean. Mean as it was, it bore the mark of orderly hands—doubtless the hands of the girl lying just inside the window.

The cabin settled still. The two outlaws on the farther pallet began to breathe heavily. The woodsman prepared to slip away but suddenly

stopped and brought his ear close to the slit under the sash—the mountain girl was crying softly.

There was a stir under the blanket where Loge Belden lay; the creak of steps came across the floor and a dim figure stooped above the pallet under the window.

"Don't cry, little sister. He ain't wo'th cryin' f'r—no man ain't."

The grit and grind of powerful teeth reached the listener outside.

"He's got t' quit pesterin' you—playin' hot an' cold with y'u—damn 'im, 'r he'll wake up some mornin' in hell with a knife in 'is ribs!"

Loge Belden, the renegade, the outlaw—the tenderness in his voice was unbelievable. The amazed listener at the window stooped along the cabin logs and softly slipped away.

CHAPTER XXIII

SPURS AND FLYING SAND

WHEN the Milford Stage came in from the city next forenoon Jack Warhope was there to meet it. So was Loge Belden. He had come from his cabin earlier in the day, probably to pick up whatever information he could at the stores, and had doubtless learned of the abrupt departure of Hopkins the evening before.

He shuffled up to the post-office window after the mail was worked. Zeke threw him out a letter. He stared at it hard; thrust it into his pocket unopened; immediately left the post-office and walked rapidly up Eagle Hollow Road.

Jack had expected there would be a letter for Belden—had counted on it. That's what had brought him to the post-office. He hurried back to the homestead; crossed the barn-lot; sprang up the rough path that led to the top of the cliff; spared a moment to glance keenly about and darted in among the trees.

Once in the seclusion of the woods, he ran at top speed, well back from the brow of the bluffs, as far as the deserted cabin of dead Henry Spencer; picked his way out to the edge of the cliffs and peeped down at the road. Loge Belden was just coming into sight.

As he came even with the cabin he stopped; glanced in every direction; whistled. The whistle was answered from within the cabin—another fact the woodsman had counted on. Belden vaulted the fence, ran up the yard and pushed open the door. Jack seized the favorable moment to steal down the bluff and, under cover of the fallen oak with its screening cucumber vines, crept up to the corner of the cabin where the chink was out between the logs.

Belden had just opened his letter; Black Bogus was stooped over him. Belden, as he read, suddenly uttered a low exclamation.

“T'-night,” he muttered—“at midnight.”

He swore merrily.

“I knowed 'e hadn't reneged—I knowed 'e hadn't.”

“Hold still,” growled the other. “Huh!” he went on—“t'-night—midnight—and a clean sweep—expects t' be with us 'imself.” He

glanced at the envelope. "W'y, he's in town—what the—"

Belden took the envelope, stuffed the letter clumsily back in it and put it in his pocket.

"Wonder what 'e meant," he muttered, "by cautionin' us s' dern p'inted p'tic'lar not t' hurt the gal—if she's thar. *If* she's thar—where else *would* she be? Says we mus'n't hurt 'er, even if we haf t' cut out an' leave the swag." He glanced away in the direction of the squalid cabin up at the head of the hollow; a black look crossed his face, and the man at the chink wondered if he was thinking of that scene at the pallet under the window the night before. "Wonder what 'e thinks we air," he went on. "Don't hurt 'er—if she's thar—hell!"

The two outlaws hunted their pipes, lounged down on the two boxes and smoked for some moments in thoughtful silence. Belden suddenly straightened; slapped his hand down on his knee.

"Must take some nerve," he chuckled, "t' murder a man, an' then preach 'is funeral."

Black Bogus drew hard on his pipe; puffed out the smoke slowly; shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Nerve—huh—he don't give up the spoon t' *nobody* when it comes t' nerve, *he* don't."

Nearly an hour the two sat smoking and intermittently discussing their plans, no detail of which escaped the listener.

Belden was the first to leave. He knocked the ashes from his pipe, stretched to the limit of his lanky height, muttered a word about its being a long time till midnight and slouched through the door. Black Bogus waited several minutes before following; finally slipped out, with far greater caution than Belden had shown; stooped low through the weeds and only came out into the road when some distance above the yard, at a point where the bushes grew dense along both sides.

The woodsman waited till he was well out of sight and sound before creeping from under the wild cucumber vines and stealing through the bushes up the hill. It was nearly noon when he came back to the brink of the cliff where the rough path led down to the barn-lot at the homestead, but he counted it time well spent—he had found out what he wanted to know.

The landscape lay before him in all its mid-day splendor. Mrs. Curry had doubtless just mended the fire in the kitchen stove at the red-

roofed cottage, for white wood smoke curled up from the chimney. But the air was evidently too light and still to bear it up, for it drifted lazily away, to settle in a long bank of airy fluffiness that draped itself above the orchard trees like the veil of a goddess lost out of the skies. Above the homestead, and farther away over the bottoms, swift winged swallows skimmed the air; a dozen or so blackbirds loped down out of the woods and stopped long enough in the big elm for a short concert.

Down by the road gate Graylock lifted his head, whinnied, came trotting up the barn-lot and the man set his feet to the rough path that wound down among the rocks.

He had let the horses into the barn and fed them, and was on the way to his cabin, with the intention of carrying the hidden bundles of money to Texie and taking her into his full confidence, when he saw Mrs. Curry, fat and portly, hurrying across the orchard at her pudgy best.

"Here's a note Texie left f'r y'u."

She held up an envelope, sealed.

"Left f'r me?"—he was in at the gate in three strides and hurrying across the yard—"where's she gone?"

"She got a letter this mornin'," Mrs. Curry puffed, "and she said she'd haf t' go t' town. She writ you this note, mounted Brownie and rode away lickety-split. She said if she didn't come back this evenin' I wuz t' git you t' sleep at our house, and I wuz t' stay with Aunt Liza."

The woodsman had snatched the note and was eagerly glancing it through:—

DEAR JACK:—

I've had such wonderful news. Ken ain't dead, after all. He is in the city at a woman's house named Doll Baker on Brickbat Alley. He is sick and wants me to come. Mr. Hopkins got a letter from him askin him to come, bein his old classmate, so he went last night and wrote back to me this morning. Pore Ken, I guess he is awful proud, and he is so sick Mr. Hopkins thought he better not tell him nothing about father. He don't want me to tell nobody, and to come alone. But I would of told you, for I know you wont tell, but I saw you going up in the woods this morning, so I wrote you this note. O, Jack, aint you glad.

TEXIE.

He crammed the letter into the envelope, thrust it into the pocket of his blouse and turned back across the yard; stopped, and glanced around at the woman.

"She had t' go and look after some—busi-

ness," he said. "I 'low I'll ride in and he'p 'er,"—he pondered a moment; went on—"and I reckon you better stay at Aunt Liza's, as she said. I'll be back t'-night—sometime—but it may be late."

The woodsman probably never covered the distance to the barn as quickly as he covered it that day. The words: "if she's there," that had so puzzled the pair in the old cabin—as well as the man at the chink—flared clear as the midday sun. Hopkins—it was his last desperate move—a move totally unforeseen. His intentions toward the girl had been foul from the first. That he would make some attempt to rob the safe was to be expected—*had* been expected. But this—

He buckled on his spurs; bridled and saddled Graylock with a feverish haste that waked the mettle of the good horse. When he led him out, Mrs. Curry was waddling across the barn-lot.

In the tense moment he had forgotten that his haste must be causing her no small wonder.

"Yes, I 'low I'll ride in and find 'er," he ventured, "and bring 'er back t'-night—sometime—but you better go on t' Aunt Liza's anyhow, f'r fear it'll be late, and we'll come and git y'u."

He saw that the attempt at reassurance—an attempt that cost him no little—had failed. The good housekeeper's face twisted quite beyond her control; her apron went up to her eyes.

"Oh, Jack," she sobbed, "I'm plum' fluster'd. Las' night Brother Hopkins left without leavin' no word, and now Texie's gone—"

The man turned and feigned to adjust the saddle girth. A woman's tears—the big woodsman was utterly helpless. He glanced back at the heaving apron.

"Now, Mis' Curry, don't be fluster'd. She's all right." He hesitated. "Them two facts ain't no ways—connected," he finally muttered, knowing only too well that they were. "The parson more'n likely went in after some more books, 'pears like he must 'a' gone through all them 'e had, and Texie—I'll hunt 'er up this afternoon and ride home with 'er." He gazed hard toward the village. "I don't b'lieve, if I was you, I'd leave the house till after dark, and I wouldn't mention she's gone—only t' Aunt Liza and Uncle Nick."

The apron came down from the troubled face and the housekeeper began to dry her eyes. The woodsman turned away; stopped; turned back.

"One question—did she take 'er revolver with 'er?"

"W'y, no," was the wondering answer—"why?"

"I didn't 'low she would 'a'."

The words came back over his shoulder as he threw the bridle rein into the hollow of his arm and strode away down the barn-lot. He flung the gate open, sprang to the saddle and Graylock was off like a bird on the wing—twenty miles of dust and flying sand—toward the dim spired gateway that led out into another world.

CHAPTER XXIV

BRICKBAT ALLEY

THERE are men so big, physically and otherwise, that the world naturally expects big things of them—who seem to find big things always cut out for them. Jack Warhope was such a man—a singular mixture of romantic impulsiveness and calm, cogent reason; a dreamer; a thinker; a man of hard deeds, whose heart sometimes ran away with his head; a Sir Galahad strayed out into the nineteenth century a thousand years behind his day.

The afternoon was half spent, and Graylock was foul with dust and sweat, when he rode across the long covered bridge over the Wabash and into the city.

Brickbat Alley had a reputation all its own. He had heard that it was in the south part of town near the river, though its exact location he did not know. Riding down into that end of the

city, he stopped to inquire of an old woman who happened to be standing in the narrow yard in front of a shabby ramshackle house with a furnished rooms sign in the window.

At the name—Doll Baker—the old woman bent upon him a look out of her bleared eyes that was both deep and searching.

“Ther’ ain’t many men runnin’ around loose, like you ’pear t’ be, but what *knows* whar Doll Baker lives. But, come t’ look at y’u clos’t, you’re someway differ’nt. F’om the country, hain’t y’u?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I ’lowed y’u wus—y’u look a differ’nt stripe f’om the likes o’ them that hunts Doll Baker.”

She paused and seemed to be weighing some thought before letting it fall.

“And this Doll Baker lives—?” he questioned, hardly able to hold the spur from Graylock.

“Brickbat Alley—that’s next alley down—fourth door on y’ur right.

“Be keerful, lad,” she called, hopping like some crippled old bird out to the fence and halting him, for he was already riding away, “be keerful. I dislike t’ see any harm fall on y’u—them’s bad people.”

It seemed to him that Graylock had never stepped so slowly. Hitching him in front of a small grocery on the street, he looked at all the other hitch-racks in sight for Brownie—but Brownie was not to be seen. Buttoning his hunting blouse about him so as to hide the six-gun, he walked into the alley.

The fourth door down on the right proved to be a large, two-story, closely shuttered wooden structure standing almost flush with the narrow side-street known as Brickbat Alley. There was another building on the same lot, a business edifice of brick, fronting on the street proper and apparently occupied by a saloon, and the two were connected by a sort of covered porch. All these facts the woodsman noted in the second or two of his approach.

He knocked at the weather stained, unpainted door. Such a long time went by that he was just on the point of knocking again, when there was a shuffling inside and approaching steps. A key rattled in the lock, the bolt clicked back, the knob turned, a woman appeared at the very narrow slit the door was allowed to open and looked out at him. She was a large woman, in good flesh, and not bad-looking.

"Is this where Doll Baker lives?"

"Yes, won't you come in?"

He entered. She closed the door, turned the key in the lock—a fact that he took due note of—and led the way into another room slightly better lighted. He noticed that both rooms were rather showily and expensively furnished.

He took the chair pointed out to him. The woman, seating herself by a small table a few feet away, eyed him covertly.

"And you are—?" he questioned, as if continuing the inquiry begun at the door.

"Miss Baker—Doll Baker."

"Well, Miss Baker," he had to watch his voice to keep it orderly and even, "I've got a friend—that is, a lady friend—that come t' the city t'-day from the country. I come in t'-day m'self, and I'd kinda like t' hunt 'er up and ride home with 'er. I was told she's here."

Regarding the obvious blind of the sick brother, he said nothing, knowing it was but a trick of the very resourceful Hopkins. The terrible letter that had prostrated the old banker just seven days before was in Ken Colin's own hand and absolutely genuine. There *was* no sick brother.

The woman sat for near a minute, closely studying him out of the baffling slits of her eyes—clothing; hands; face; feet—in a way she did not think he saw.

“What kind of a looking girl was your—friend?” she questioned at last.

“Medium size, fair, brown hair, brown eyes—with smiles in ’em—and remarkably small and purty hands and feet.”

“Well, she isn’t here.”

The gray-green eyes of the woman watched him covertly through their narrowed lids. He caught the look, felt the caution.

“Where is she?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“I’m awful sorry,” he replied, in tones he tried hard to make meek and doleful. “She ain’t nothin’ but jist a raw country girl, and I ain’t nothin’ but jist a raw country boy, but we’re both from the same little town out here a ways and I wanted t’ see ’er awful bad b’fore she left—town.”

The woman still eyed him closely, though her look seemed gradually to become more curious than distrustful, until at last she appeared to throw off all suspicion.

"Well, Mr.—Country Boy," she said, with an air of frankness and a twist of her face between a grin and a smile. "I don't know one thing about your—friend, and that's straight."

"Do y'u know Professor Caleb Hopkins?"

The question caught the woman off guard. She started.

"Never heard of him,"—she hesitated; finally added—"but you might go on through and ask Bill."

"Who's Bill?"

"Oh, friend of mine—bounces bar out front."

The man studied her. In his eyes there waked a hardness that the Flatwoods had learned to know.

"Miss—Doll Baker"—it cost him an effort to hold his voice even and calm—"I'm right sorry t' say I'm doubtin' y'u."

"Doubting me!" A tang of hardness slid into her well modulated tones; she flared up straight in her chair. "What do you mean?"

"I mean t' search this house."

The woman sprang up.

"Search th' house!"

"That's what I'm aimin' t' do," the woodsman went on evenly, rising and glancing about him.

The woman caught a small cord that dangled behind the door in reach of her hand and gave it a vicious jerk. It must have been a bell cord that led to somewhere outside, for immediately heavy steps sounded along the porch that connected the house with the saloon and a man dashed in at the door.

"Bill, you'll haf t' 'ten' to 'im"—she jerked a half clenched hand toward the woodsman—"threatens t' raid th' j'int f'r a gal he thinks is here."

So this was Bill—the "bouncer." He looked the part—broad-backed, thick set, heavy jowled, little pig eyes and short cropped, reddish hair. He raised his arm, pointed a stubby forefinger to the door and uttered the one word: "Git."

But had Bill only known what manner of man it was standing there and coolly measuring him through narrowed eyes, he probably would have studied a long time before making his next move.

"The devil y'u won't," he snarled, crouching and beginning to creep and circle.

"Don't hurt 'im," the woman cautioned, "he ain't nothin' but jist a raw country jake."

Almost with the word Bill sprang, aiming a

blow that would have caved in the side of a house—only it didn't land.

The fact was instantly apparent that he was not a resourceful fighter, but placed his main reliance in his ponderous strength—even so, he was a dangerous man.

In a flash he wheeled and struck again. This time Jack parried the blow, instead of side-stepping, and shot across one in return—a light upper cut to the chin that jarred Bill's head back and drew from him a snarl and a curse. He came back with a whirlwind of jabs and swings.

Jack stepped right into the whirlwind, well knowing that others of Bill's ilk might come any moment, and sparred for an opening with such bewildering speed and cleverness that Bill raised his guard to cover his face. Jack shot across a vicious body blow. Bill dropped his left. Instantly Jack's tremendous right swung on the exposed jaw. Bill grunted, tottered, looked dazed. The right swung again on the same spot—clean from the hip—and Bill pitched against the wall like a bundle of dirty rags.

With a curse, horrible upon a woman's lips, Doll Baker ran to where he lay and bent over him.

She had hardly reached him before the woodsman was darting about the house and peeping into pantry and closets. There was no basement. He made sure of that, and sprang to the stairs. The woman tried to drag him back, he flung her off and dashed up the steps.

Every place where a girl could have been concealed was explored, but Doll Baker had told the truth—that much of it, at least. Texie was not there.

When he hurried down, Bill and the woman were both gone. He was just stepping from the stair door, wary and alert for a surprise of some sort, when there came a clatter of feet running across the porch.

He dashed through the house to the door by which he had entered. Just as he wrenched it open they rushed into the room behind him—four of them, Bill in the lead.

But, his purpose accomplished, Jack sprang outside and, with tantalizing deliberation, took his way toward the street. Bill thrust his battered face out at the door, scowled and swore, but none of the four ventured to follow, like the alley rats they were, not daring to chase their prey into the open.

CHAPTER XXV

SCAR OF THE GANGPLANK

THROUGH a number of streets and side-streets in the neighborhood of Brickbat Alley, Jack Warhope searched for Brownie. He even made inquiries at all the livery and feed stables in the vicinity, but failed to find any trace of her.

A thought suddenly came to him—he frowned hard; muttered some very uncomplimentary things about himself that it hadn't occurred to him before—the old toll-gate keeper ten miles out on the River Road, he had been there more years than Jack had lived and knew everybody from the Flatwoods. He would know if Texie had passed.

Next moment the fleet Graylock was racing toward the bridge, with his master bitterly upbraiding himself that he had overlooked a point so simple and obvious.

Ten miles out on the River Road he drew rein

and dismounted by the well in front of the diminutive house of the old toll-gate keeper.

"Jist a mouthful f'r the hoss, Uncle Asbury."

"He'p y'urse'f." The old man shuffled up out of his rickety chair and limped toward the well. "Be'n lettin' 'im out, hain't y'u?"

"Some—yes."

He loosened the saddle girth; with the squeaky windlass cranked up a bucketful of water; allowed the horse to have it sparingly, a sup at a time.

"Has Texie Colin passed the gate t'-day, Uncle Asbury?—you know 'er, don't y'u?"

"Ol' Sime Colin's da'ter—the purty leetle gal wi' the brown hair an' laughin' eyes—well, I reckon I do know 'er. No, she hain't passed the gate t'-day, nary way—why?"

"Oh—she rid up this way—"

"Did she?—no, she didn't pass." He hobbled a step closer. "Ol' Sime had t' let loose at last, didn't 'e? Dern' shame, though, 'e had t' be *bumped* off. Reckon they ain't found the feller yit that done it?"

The woodsman made no reply. It is even doubtful if he heard. His mind was flying fast from point to point of every possibility that lay

between Black Rock and the toll-gate. He washed the froth off Graylock's nose; tightened the saddle girth; paid his toll and mounted.

"Thanks f'r the drink, Uncle Asbury."

"I don't make no business o' waterin' hosses," the old man called after him as he rode away, "but a hoss like that—he's welcome t' drink the well dry."

The concealed house-boat—the woodsman pondered the significance of it; the possibilities of it; the horrible threat of it as he galloped down the road.

He glanced at the sun—within half an hour of the tree-tops. He had blundered—Hopkins had just undercut him—but maybe the light would hold to redeem the blunder. His jaw tightened and he gave Graylock the rein, closely scanning every inch of the road—and every foot of river—that came into view as he passed.

Two miles above Black Rock, just where a by-road, a mere wagon track, led off across the wooded bottoms, he found what he was looking for—a mass of horse tracks, with a print or two of a boot heel that he knew.

His lips twisted into a hard grin; tightened till they squeezed every mite of mirth out of it.

He had lost the trail; like a hound at fault, had actually run by it—and here it lay, right where he had crossed it hours before.

He had been bending low in the saddle. He straightened, and, with eyes constantly sweeping the tangle of copse and bramble, rode cautiously down the by-road through the dank and dismal bottoms. Where the narrow by-road approached Mud Haul he again found what he was looking for—Brownie hitched to a tree, restless and prancing from side to side.

Hiding Graylock in a thicket, he unbuttoned his blouse, loosened his revolver in its holster and crept down the mucky bank toward the hiding-place of the house-boat; crawled close to its lurking place—it was gone.

He came out of the bushes and found where the gangplank had freshly scarred the mud; searched the shore for footprints; found them;—the marks of a shapely small shoe, and the print of a stylish boot heel.

A speck of color caught his eye near the scar of the gangplank—a spot of gold on the dank mud. He stepped forward and bent over it. The next moment he had snatched up something and stood gazing at it—a yellow orchid

flattened and faded, in all likelihood the very one he had found for her the Friday before—lady slipper day. Over the man's fine face spread a light that transfigured it.

But there was a task calling—tense; insistent; mayhap horrible. Taking out his pocketbook, he put the flower carefully away; frowned hard down the river shore.

Knowing that the narrow by-road led through the wooded flats almost to Alpine Island, angled sharply and crossed to the bluffs something more than a mile above Black Rock, he went back to Graylock, left Brownie prancing and pawing the weeds, and rode cautiously on down the river.

Just short of the point where the narrow road angled toward the bluffs, he again hid Graylock, went on afoot some distance farther and stole through the trees to the river bank.

Alpine Island, as has been said, divides the Wabash into two nearly equal channels. Creeping down to the edge of the water, with a caution so great that a crane wading a rod or two below failed to take the alarm, Jack crawled out among the limbs of a cottonwood that had uprooted and lopped over into the stream and

peered down the sides of the island, lying less than two hundred yards below.

A short distance down the south side, almost completely hidden among the willows and riding at the end of a rope hitched to a tree on the bank, lay a small house-boat with a skiff tied at its side—unmistakably the same tiny craft that had found concealment at the head of Mud Haul.

The woodsman was just stealing back through the limbs of the cottonwood, with the bold intention of creeping farther down the bank and swimming out to the island, when a man came out of the snug little cabin, carefully closed the door, fumbled a while as if locking it and stood on the diminutive forward deck looking guardedly about.

Even in the dim remnant of the fast closing day that was able to penetrate under the gloom of the willows, there was no mistaking the somber frock coat, neck stock and high hat—it was Caleb Hopkins. A moment he stood listening at the door; glanced around again in every direction; and slipped over the side of the house-boat into the skiff.

As he rowed up around the head of the island

and across the north channel to shore, he passed within less than fifty yards of where the woodsman lay concealed, his eyes hard and dangerous, his fingers betraying an almost irresistible inclination to stray toward the butt of the revolver at his hip.

Drawing the skiff well in among the fringe of scrub willows, Hopkins glanced back in the direction of the house-boat, snarled out an impatient exclamation and set off across the bottoms. The woodsman rose and softly followed; shadowed him through the tangle of bushes and vines and fallen logs out to the River Road; watched him cross, pick his way up the bluff and slip away among the trees of the upland.

The unguarded safe, the bundles of money under the floor of the cabin at the homestead, crossed the woodsman's mind. But there was a far higher stake in his tense thought just then than safes and bundles of money. The frock coat and high hat were no sooner well out of sight than he sprang up from where he lay in the thicket at the edge of the bottoms and hurried back to the skiff; slid it out from the willows and crossed the channel to the island. There he hid it again and slipped through the

tangle of underbrush and driftwood to where he could get a view of the house-boat.

For some time he crouched listening and studying the little craft riding at the end of its rope, rising and falling upon the pulse of the river as peacefully as if danger and rapine and death were as foreign to it as ice gorges in May. There reached him the dull sound of footfalls on the cabin floor, and the tiny craft rocked slightly as some one evidently crossed from side to side, but there was no sound of voices; from which he concluded that the unknown tenant was alone.

A bare remnant of the day that was gone fell from the still faintly purple west and played upon the open water, but hardly a suggestion of it penetrated the dense willows. In the fast gathering shadows he crept to the edge of the island; crawled with extraordinary care under the hand rail to the diminutive forward deck.

The door he had watched Hopkins fumbling over he *had* locked—padlocked on the outside. He stood still and listened—some one was moving about inside the cabin, and a speck of light showed behind a narrow crack between the door and the jamb.

Very guardedly he crossed the deck and brought his eye close to the crack—it commanded a view of a narrow section of the room. A candle was alight somewhere at the side, and a shadow—one shadow—flitted about the floor. The shadow slid across the section that he could see; deepened; disappeared; and in its place—Texie.

In the brief moment she stopped in the section of the floor commanded by the crevice, he caught a view of her face. It was very disturbed and worried—but not frightened.

She came to the door on the outside of which he was crouched and tugged at the latch, as she had probably done many times since being left a prisoner. The latch raised, rattled as she shook it back and forth, but the stout padlocked hasp held firm. With an exclamation that held just a shade of petulance, she turned away. The man was glad of that—the petulance. It was the most heartening sound he had heard since Mrs. Curry handed him the letter.

He watched her till she passed out of range of the crevice—doubtless to sound the walls for some other means of escape.

But the narrow opening had told him what it

heartened him much to know. He took a bullet from his pouch; flattened it between his teeth; with his powerful fingers forced it noiselessly into the keyhole of the padlock in such a way as to make it impossible to insert the key; jammed it so tight with the blade of his pocket knife that nothing short of a locksmith's tools could have dislodged it. Crawling along the gangway to the after deck, he rendered the padlock on the rear door equally useless; listened a moment to the quick restless steps inside; crawled under the hand rail to the bank and, with every precaution known to woodcraft to hide his trail, recrossed the island to the skiff.

Sparing a moment to sift the shadows up and down the murky shore, and far across the bottoms where the bearded cliffs drew their dim and ragged line along the sky—he shoved the skiff into the water, rowed up around the head of the island, down the south channel and back to the house-boat. Fastening the skiff to the rail, he unhitched the rope from the willow on the bank; sprang lightly to the forward deck, being careful to keep out of range of the crevice between the door and jamb; picked up one of the two light poles with which such craft are

propelled; pushed off; suffered the snug little vessel to catch the drift of the current and, being careful to keep well within the shadow of the willows, let it drift down the channel.

Far down toward the lower point of the island, just above the famous Alpine Hole where the seine had caught on the snag six days before, a narrow pocket gashed into the rather steep bank—a place well known to the woodsman. Carefully withdrawing the boat from the current as he approached, he deftly turned the prow; poled the little vessel into the slack water of the pocket and far up under the overhanging vines and branches, where it would likely escape anything short of the very closest scrutiny, either from land or water; hitched it securely to a tree on the bank; went back to the deck and stood listening.

The girl inside the cabin had repeatedly wrenched at the doors as the vessel drifted down the channel. Several times she had called the name of Hopkins, begging him to release her, doubtless believing it was he that set the boat adrift. To all this the woodsman had returned no answer.

She must have known when the boat stopped,

must have heard the scrape of the limbs and vines as it was poled up into the pocket, for there followed an interval of silence. He could not resist the longing to steal once more to the narrow crevice where the bar of candle-light escaped. He brought his eye close; peeped within.

She was standing near the middle of the floor, listening intently and apparently in deep thought. As he watched, he saw a sudden light leap to her face and wake the wonder of her eyes. She crossed the floor; came close to the door and, with the caution of a woodcraft almost as fine as his own, softly called:

“Jack—!”

It took the utter sum of the man's resolution to keep still. He watched the wonder of her eyes transform to disappointment and despair; watched her stand clasping and unclasping the slim fingers of her shapely small hands.

One consideration alone restrained him from beating to fragments the disabled padlock and setting her free—right in that stout cabin, with its doors secured by jammed locks that could not be opened without breaking, securely hidden at the end of a covered trail, was the safest

place in the Flatwoods for her just then. There would be hard faces and quick fingers in the red-roofed cottage that night.

But even so, it was the most difficult thing the big woodsman had ever tried to do in his life to turn away from that door and go back to the skiff.

With set and serious face he rowed up the channel, around the head of the island, across to the mainland and carefully stepped ashore; dropped both oars into the river; set the boat adrift; stood a moment watching it float away and, with extraordinary pains to hide his trail, hurried back to Graylock.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE DEAD NIGHT

TWILIGHT had long faded into dark, the hazy stars seeming only to intensify the deep gloom of the woods, when Jack Warhope returned to Black Rock, coming in by way of the feed-pens, and slipping the horses into the barn through the cattle sheds.

The ripe night had come when he stole across the barn-lot, through the fallow yard, along the dim orchard path, crawled between two loosened palings of the fence and to the back of the red-roofed cottage. The house bulked huge, dark, lonesome. No smoke curled out from the chimney and crawled up along the hard night sky. Mrs. Curry had obeyed instructions and was probably at that very moment trying to hide from the sharp eyes of Aunt Liza the anxiety she doubtless suffered.

He crouched a long time on the kitchen step

listening. No unusual sound disturbed the silence. Very carefully he fitted his key—the same that had come so near causing him trouble at the inquest—into the lock; guardedly turned it; worked the door slowly open; entered; softly closed and locked it.

The west window of the kitchen, a pale spot in the blackness, seemed only to enhance the deeper darkness of the inside. Stealing across the floor, he made his way to the small office room where the papers and safe were kept. The pale starlight, looking leaden at the windows, was enough to make the place depressing, even without the recollection of the tragedy that had so recently befallen there.

He tiptoed behind the curtains that hung over the entrance to a closet under the stair in the sitting-room and stood still, his ears strung for every sound that rode the night.

Never before had he noticed what an infinite number of queer sounds could come out of the dark. He began to understand how lonely garrets and out-of-the-way corners became peopled with ghost and goblin. A loosened shutter at the west gable rattled in the light breeze that had sprung up; over across the orchard at the

homestead the geese cackled; a dog barked somewhere up the River Road and was answered by two others in the village.

Through the closed door of the parlor there came the scrape of a match. His ears strained toward the sound. No, it was the wind rasping a branch of the rose-bush against the house outside.

It couldn't have been short of midnight, and his mind had gone back to the house-boat, riding safe and secure in the pocket at Alpine Island, when there came the sound for which his ears were straining—hands outside prying at the window of the west room.

He drew his revolver, cocked it and took a position so that he could see through the curtains without causing them to move.

There came a low sound of crumbling wood; the muffled slither of cracking glass; the soft grate of the sash as it was slowly raised; finally the creak of the window-sill and the faint swish of clothing as somebody crawled through. The sounds were repeated—one—no more.

There followed the subdued shuffle of feet; whispers; the guarded scrape of a match; the flicker of a tardy candle. A dim light fell

through the open door in a long splotch of yellow across the sitting-room and the knob of the safe was softly turned. His ears were strung to such a pitch that he could hear the very faint click of tools, and the muffled drag of the crude, old-fashioned lock as its clumsy bolt unseated. By some supersense that marvelously functions at such a moment, he knew when the door opened. Across the silence came the subdued crinkle of paper. The ripe instant had come.

Pushing the curtains aside, he left the closet. A board in the floor creaked as his weight came upon it. He stood perfectly still until the rattle of the paper told him the creaking board had not betrayed him; worked his way around the wall and peered past the door-jamb.

Two men were crouched by a shaded candle in front of the massive safe; on the floor lay several bundles of money and a number of loose bills.

Even in the dim light there was no mistaking them. That powerful figure with the swart face could be but one man in the world—Black Bogus. The pointed beard, frock coat and neck stock, the tall hat on the floor, disclosed with

equal positiveness the far more dangerous identity of the other—the formidable and mysterious man who called himself Caleb Hopkins—the third man of the mountain girl's warning.

Although the man creeping around the door-jamb made far less sound than the rattle of the money, yet Black Bogus caught the alarm; whirled on the instant, his hand at his hip.

Fate figures in split fractions at such a time—and the odds were two to one, with probably a third somewhere outside. The half haunting resemblance that had so puzzled the woodsman never seemed stronger than at that dangerous instant, but it meant death to falter. There was a bright flash in the candle-light: Black Bogus, a hideous grimace upon his truculent face, seemed to shrink together; the revolver that he had not had time to raise fell from his fingers; he pitched forward upon his face; lay still.

Before he struck the floor, almost before the bullet that finished forever his wild career had found its mark, Jack whirled his weapon upon the other man. His head had been deep in the safe—a fact that probably saved the woodsman's life. Like a viper out of his coil the head flew out of the safe, and with it—the ivory handled six-gun.

But the split fraction of the instant had lost him the advantage. His weapon had hardly left its holster before it was shot out of his hand—pieces of the ivory butt flew about the room, and blood streamed from the shattered fingers that had held it.

But Hopkins was not a coward. That, at least, could not be set down against him. Instead of leaping for the still open window, he sprang straight at Jack Warhope. The woodsman could have shot him down; instead, he jammed the revolver back into its holster and met the oncoming rush.

It was a battle the like of which the Flatwoods had never seen. No two such men can clash and come through unscathed. But it is doubtful if Hopkins at his best could have matched the tremendous strength and quickness and skill of the big woodsman. With his right hand shattered by the bullet, it soon became apparent that, for all the wild fury of his onset, he was fighting a losing battle. He realized it, and the despair bereft him of his caution. The woodsman realized it, too, kept his head, tightened his guard and watched for the opening that he knew was bound to come.

It came sooner than he thought. Hopkins,

desperate and breathing thick, swung at the woodsman's head, but missed. The attempt had for the instant exposed his stomach, and the woodsman took advantage of it. The blow weakened Hopkins; he tottered, gasped, instinctively lowered his guard. Like lightning the woodsman swung his terrific right to the point of the bearded jaw, and Hopkins went down like a beef under the mallet.

But Loge Belden was still unaccounted for, a circumstance the woodsman had not forgotten, that had puzzled him no little. Bruised and panting himself, he dragged Hopkins back of the safe out of range of the window—as it chanced, near the candle on the floor—and stood over him.

His heavy mass of black hair had fallen across his brow—amongst the black, one lock of glaring red. The woodsman snatched up the candle; bent closer and covered the lower part of the bearded face with his hand.

"My God!" he muttered—"the red lock—it's Ken."

He set the candle down; straightened; stood staring at the prostrate figure on the floor, for the moment swept beyond his habitual calm

and poise. The transformation that the one lock of red wrought on the bearded face was unbelievable—cruel; sinister; brutal—as if the face of Red Colin, the old sea pirate, had sprung out of a long dead past.

The fallen man stirred, rattled his heels on the floor, moved his arms, sat up and stared about him. Suddenly aware of the hard eyes upon him, he hurriedly raised a hand and hastily brushed the mass of hair back into place.

"It ain't no use, Ken," came from the other side of the candle, "I seen it."

The man on the floor scrambled to his feet; glanced toward the window, at the candle within reach of his foot, as if meditating some desperate move; frowned at the shattered fingers; stiffened, leaned against the safe door.

"Well—?"

The old arrogant haughtiness that the woodsman remembered so well—that used to awe him; dominate him—was in the expressive monosyllable. But it didn't awe him now—it rasped him; crawled up through his blood and struck a spark from his eyes. He was a long time answering; when he did, it was with another question.

"What have y'u got t' say why I oughtn' t' hand y'u over t' Jerry Brown?"

"Not a damn' thing, though I'd rather be pinched anywhere else in the world than here"—a shade of the haughtiness left his tones—"on account of—Sis."

The big woodsman winced—which the other, with his quick wits, just then strung to keenest pitch, doubtless noticed.

"Live while y'u may; t' hell when y'u must—it's all a game of chance anyhow, with the odds on the man with the quickest fingers. I've seen twenty-seven years of it—a game not worth the candle."

"It is if y'u play it square."

"Square," the other snarled, "a word the devil invented t' throw men off guard. There *ain't* any such word"—he hesitated, a softer light flitted across his expressive face—"except—in the Flatwoods."

The woodsman caught the transient softer light—an expression that in other days used so to win him.

"Then why not come back t' the—Flatwoods—?"

The other glanced down at the money on the

floor; half lifted his face and covertly studied the man before him. The eyes of the woodsman—so slow at times; so quick at need—involuntarily turned in the direction of Alpine Island.

“Texie—she still b’lieves in y’u, and I ain’t quite give up b’lievin’ in y’u m’self. You was careful t’ git—her”—his eyes were again drawn irresistibly toward the concealed house-boat—“out of danger t’-night, and I ’low y’u never *aimed* t’ hurt Pap Simon, and y’u ain’t takin’ away nothin’ but what y’u brought. It would kill—her, if she knowed it was you that done—this”—he swept his hand toward the scattered money, the open safe, the dead robber; glanced in the direction of the churchyard, where lay a new-made grave—“and worse. You could go ’way—a while, and then come—back.” He paused; his eyes hardened. “But the next time y’u’ve got t’ come—clean.”

The eyes of the other turned in every direction except toward the man addressing him. A moment of silence fell.

“Where’s Belden?” Jack suddenly asked.

The other started; glanced at the open window—a bit uneasily, as it might have seemed.

"He didn't show up, that's all I know."

"Did *they* know who y'u—are?"

The man addressed glanced down at the huddled body on the floor; frowned in the direction of Eagle Hollow.

"Cattle like them—hell!"

The woodsman frowned at the words, but apparently decided to pass them over.

"Then—nobody needs t' know." He dropped a half-opened hand toward the body of the fallen robber. "He's enough t' satisfy Jerry Brown, and one more mark ag'in' 'im won't make no difference t' Black Bogus now."

Still watching the window, as well as the man leaning on the door of the safe, he picked up the ruins of the ivory handled six-gun—being careful to hunt the pieces that had scattered about the room—and dropped them all into the pocket of his hunting blouse; lifted the tall hat from the floor and held it forth; motioned toward the open window.

The other took the hat; put it on with curious deliberation; stared hard at the scattered money; stepped around the body of his dead associate; crossed the floor and, closely followed by the woodsman, who still watched him

narrowly, crawled through the window and stood in apparent stolidness, as if waiting to be told what to do next.

The woodsman, no little rankled that his offered clemency—an offer that had cost him much to make—had been received with cold, even haughty indifference, dropped to the ground behind him and stood a moment sounding the night. Except at Uncle Nick's, where Mrs. Curry probably lay tossing with anxiety, not a candle was alight. Having been fired indoors, the two shots had doubtless sounded so far away that they had not alarmed the village. He closed the window and turned to the stolid figure in front of him.

“I’m givin’ y’u time to warn Loge Belden off and take t’ the woods—if y’u’re quick. When I think the time’s up, I’m aimin’ t’ fire off Pap Simon’s shotgun and rouse the village. This house will be put under guard t’-night, and t’-morrow all that money will be took t’ the city and put in the bank, where it ough’ t’ be’n long ago”—a thought of the mountain girl crying under the window the night before crossed his mind, and his voice grew crisp and cold—“and if y’u *never* come back, w’y, that’ll be soon

enough f'r me; but if y'u do, y'u've *got* t' come clean."

A black scowl swept the bearded face of the other; his eyes glared dangerously. Warhope—the bound boy—that he had committed the blunder of so vastly underrating! He half turned, a muttered oath on his lips; but mastered the outburst, and, with the air of a man who bowed to circumstances, strode across the yard, nursing his shattered hand and fumbling the elaborate frock coat about him.

All unknown to the woodsman there lay concealed in that same frock coat another weapon—a small single shot pistol of heavy caliber that thugs of the underworld often carried, deadly at close range but inaccurate at a distance—a weapon that the men of the woods knew nothing about. At the brink of the yard, just where it dipped to the little park, he suddenly snatched it forth; whirled and fired.

Even with his right hand shattered and having to shoot with his left, with almost no light at all, the shot disclosed what he could have done with a real gun—the bullet scorched the woodsman's blouse and passed between his left arm and his side. The man crouched at the brink of

the yard watched the success of the shot—his last desperate attempt—knew that it failed; swore, and dashed away up the path that led into the jaws of Eagle Hollow.

It all occurred in the flick of an instant. Amazed at the treachery, the woodsman sprang out of the dim square of candle-light that fell through the window. He snatched out his revolver and was just straining a step in pursuit when, from somewhere in the yard behind him, there came a low cry—his name—so faint as to leave a doubt that he had heard. It froze him into a listening statue.

It came again—a woman's cry—borne up on the breath of the night. He would have known that voice among shouting thousands. He turned and bounded down the yard toward the gate.

Up from the gate she came, half running, half reeling, but before he could reach her she stopped, stood for a moment groping with her hands, drooped forward and fell with her face upon the grass.

CHAPTER XXVII

CORE OF THE TARGET

WITH a cry Jack Warhope caught up the unconscious girl in his arms, to discover that she must have been in the river, for her garments were completely saturated, and her hair hung about her shoulders sodden and dripping.

He was wrapping his hunting blouse about her when, with a startled exclamation, he jerked away his hand and held it up between his face and the sky—it was smudged with blood. He bent over the girl—blood was streaming from her right shoulder and running down her side. That last bullet from the edge of the yard—it had found the core of a tragic target.

Picking her up in his arms, he ran around to the kitchen, dashed the door open and laid her on the sofa in the sitting-room.

He had wrapped her in blankets snatched

from the parlor bedroom, torn up a sheet for bandages and was doing his best to stop the blood, when there came the sound of a man running across the yard, and the next moment Uncle Nick, doubtless alarmed by that last shot—coming as it did upon the heels of the house-keeper's story—was calling and pounding at the sitting-room door. Jack threw it open.

"Texie's hurt!" he cried. "Quick—Doctor Arnold—and Aunt Liza and Mrs. Curry."

Without a question the old man hurried away.

The woodsman had brought the candle out of the room where the dead robber lay, closed the door, and was doing his best to stop the blood and restore the girl to consciousness, when the doctor ran in.

A hurried word or two and he was at the hurt shoulder. The bullet—it was his first care. With quick skill he hunted it; fortunately located it almost immediately. It had just missed the lung, ranged upward and lodged barely beneath the skin at the top of the shoulder. He made a small incision and probed it out.

He had washed the wound and had it nearly dressed when Aunt Liza came running in, fol-

lowed an instant later by Mrs. Curry, flurried and panting. Changing Texie's sodden garments for dry ones, while the woodsman built a fire in the kitchen stove, they laid her between warm blankets in the parlor bedroom.

The man coaxed his fire till he had it roaring; filled the tea kettle, and dashed to the spring for more water. As he crossed the yard he noticed lights beginning to appear here and there in the village. The red-roofed cottage would soon be the center for curious eyes. He dipped up his bucket of water with all haste and hurried back to the house.

Uncle Nick had slipped in with his noiseless step and stood leaning against the mantel in the sitting-room. A moment later the doctor entered.

Picking up the candle, the woodsman crossed the floor, threw open the door of the room where the dead robber lay and motioned for the two men.

Even the doctor started, aghast at the gruesome, huddled form sprawled there among the littered, blood-spattered money. Uncle Nick's muttered cry brought the two women running from the sick room, to gaze with the others—

awed to silence by the tragedy that had again visited the quiet cottage.

The woodsman well knew that questions would be flashing through each mind—had been since the discovery of Texie's hurt—knew that each looked to him for the answer. A low moan came from the parlor bedroom. That last treacherous shot—he knew that the man with the red lock could never come back. It had been a mistake to shield him; a blunder to trust him—a blunder that was being paid for at a fearful cost.

The doctor was the first to break the silence.

"What does this mean?"—the question was half a demand.

"It means—Caleb Hopkins," was the hard, incisive answer.

The doctor started; the two women caught their breath; Uncle Nick swore, felt ashamed of it, looked foolish.

"This dead man,"—the woodsman dropped a hand toward the huddled form—"is Black Bogus." The two women looked at each other; shrank back. The doctor's eyes lifted; he drew a step nearer and gazed hard at the body. "Him and Hopkins and"—Loge Belden, the

man was about to say, but thought of the mountain girl crying there by the window and he—didn't; besides, Belden had not shown himself at the robbery—"they're both outlaws and counterf'iters. Hopkins would take good money out of the safe and put counterf'it bills in place of it.

"It was him that killed Pap Simon—that is, Pap Simon run out on 'im that night while he was changin' the counterf'it f'r good money, and in the scuffle died of heart disease. That shet off their game, of course, so they planned t' make a clean sweep t'-night and go.

"Hopkins—went t' town and writ back a letter t' Texie, makin' out it was from—Ken. The letter said he was sick in town and wanted 'er t' come to 'im. So she went, leavin' a note with Mis' Curry f'r me. The minute I got the note I knowed it was—Hopkins. I'd be'n suspicious of 'im and had be'n watchin' 'im, so I rode after 'er as quick as I could—clean t' the city, t' the place where the letter said Ken was sick; found I was off the trail; rode back as fast as Graylock could bring me t' try and pick it up.

"I found where Hopkins had headed Texie off up the road a ways and got 'er on that

house-boat Uncle Nick and the rest of us saw hid there at the head of Mud Haul the day we went seinin'. Mor'n likely he told 'er Ken was on the boat and he was takin' 'im home in it. Anyhow, he got 'er on, locked her in and moved the boat.

"But I found where he'd hid it at Alpine Island, and watched 'im sneak back to the woods—t' wait f'r dark, as I 'lowed. As soon as he was out o' sight, I took 'is skiff, crossed to the island, got on the house-boat without lettin' Texie know I was there, looked through a crack in the door and found out she was safe.

"Then, without lettin' 'er know it was me, I moved the house-boat and hid it in a new place; left her locked in—b'cause I thought it would be the safest place she could be jist then—and hurried back here t' watch the house, fully b'lievin' they intended t' rob the safe t'-night.

"About midnight they come. I—killed Black Bogus and hurt Hopkins, but he—got away. Texie must 'a' broke out o' the house-boat somehow and swum ashore. I didn't know it, but she was jist comin' into the yard when I jumped out o' the winder after Hopkins, and that last shot he fired at me hit her."

It was a tremendous recital, brief; terse; not quite true; yet anything but false; by far the longest speech he had ever made in his life, even with so much left out—the watching in the park; the tears of the mountain girl; that tense scene at the parsonage when he had recovered the stolen money; the fight at Doll Baker's; the true identity of Hopkins; the fruitless, perhaps fatal attempt to save him. He saw questions still in the eyes fixed upon him. A moan came from the parlor bedroom—and every other consideration gave way to the sufferer.

Alone with Uncle Nick, the woodsman securely fastened the window that had been pried open, closed the door on the gruesome scene and went to the kitchen. Curious faces were beginning to gather in the yard. He turned to the old man.

"Uncle Nick,"—his voice showed the strain he was under—"send them away. Tell 'em as little as possible, but for—her sake, keep 'em away—Jerry Brown above all, if he happens t' wake up and take it into 'is head t' come up here. And I 'low y'u better git somebody t' ride in after the coroner."

The old man nodded and turned to the door. The other caught his sleeve.

"And when it's light, I wish y'u'd sneak up Eagle Holler a little and kinda throw an eye out f'r Loge Belden."

The brows of the old hunter lifted.

"I wondered why y'u left *him* out in—there." He jerked his head toward the room they had just left.

The next moment, with a step that the years seemed powerless to totter or stiffen, he had glided through the kitchen door and out among the curious faces in the yard.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SPRAWLED FIGURE ON THE BROKEN FLOOR

THE sleepless night wore itself out; morning came to the cottage; and Texie still lived.

On the heels of the dawn Uncle Nick poked his head, with its cap of hand-dressed coonskin, in at the kitchen door and motioned with his finger. The woodsman lifted his face from his hands, rose and went out.

Without a word the old man turned and, with another very positive motion of his hand, led the way across the corner of the yard, into the little park, out through the fallow pasture lot and to the Eagle Hollow Road.

Well within the dim gray jaws of the hollow he paused; glanced back over his shoulder.

"When I p'inted m' nose up the crick this mornin', as you said, I noticed the door o' that ol' cabin whar Hen Spencer raised the devil that night wus part way open. I knowed it hadn't

be'n open f'r years, so I snuck up and peeked in. Come on."

With the long, lanky, half running stride that he had probably copied from the Indians, the old ranger and scout, closely followed by the young man, trotted away up the gulch, climbed the fence in front of the cabin of the dead wood-chopper, ran up through the dew-wet weeds to the half-opened door, pushed it wider and entered.

There on the dusty floor boards, partly twisted on his side, his face staring up, one arm crumpled under him, with a dirk knife buried to the hilt in his breast, sprawled the man that called himself Caleb Hopkins—dead.

The woodsman stooped over the body; looked up curiously at his aged companion.

"Do y'u know 'im?"

"It's Hopkins."

"Look close."

The old man glanced at his companion, caught the odd expression in his eyes, stooped over the sprawled figure and bent his eyes intently upon the dead face, slowly shook his head.

"Course, I don't 'low 'is name's Hopkins, n'

more'n mine is," he muttered, "but it's the best I can do."

The woodsman stooped; raked the mass of hair down; brought the red lock into view; spread his hand over the lower part of the face to hide the beard.

"By the lord!—Ken Colin."

Jack took his hand away from over the beard; scraped the hair carefully back into place.

The amazement of the aged hunter slowly gave place to a puzzled thoughtfulness, his mind doubtless busy with many a question still unanswered. The woodsman slowly rose, still gazing down upon the bearded dead face.

"They say that red lock comes down from ol' Red Colin, a sea pirate hundreds of years ago, that it shows up every three 'r four generations, alw'ys bringin' along with it a drop 'r two of bad blood. It shore played the devil with Ken."

"Didn't it!" was Uncle Nick's thoughtful comment—"robbed and murdered 'is ol' man, an' then preached 'is funeral—lord!

"Ain't it queer," he went on, "how things like that crop out years and years after a man's dead. Hit's enough t' make 'im keerful how 'e b'have's 'imself while he's alive."

A short silence fell.

"I could 'a' killed 'im there at the safe," the woodsman mused, half to himself, "but I—didn't. I only shot away 'is gun and fought 'im fair. When he was down, with 'is hair all mussed up and the red lock worked out in sight, that was the first time I knowed 'im. After that, I tried t'—save 'im and let 'im git away, not knowin' he had another pistol hid on 'im. When he thought 'e had me off guard, he turned around quick and shot; missed me—and hit—her."

He stood a long time silent, his head half bent aside, his thoughts doubtless back where a hapless sufferer lay moaning; turned at last; gazed at the knife, buried to a gruesome depth in the blood mussed shirt-front of the fallen man; glanced up at his old friend and found the deep set eyes studying him in thoughtful retrospection.

"Uncle Nick."

The eyes wakened.

"What sort of a lock have y'u got on y'ur jaw?"

"Tight as a clam shell, if you say so," was the ready answer.

"I'm askin' y'u t' lock it,"—his words were serious and slow. "It ain't no use t' worry—her"—he jerked his head down the gulch—"by lettin' 'er find out it was—him—"

He gazed down at the sprawled body.

"I'm askin' you t' 'tend t' lay'n' 'im out and buryin' 'im; and be *p'inted* p'tic'lar t' keep 'is hair combed so's the red lock don't show. Nobody would know 'im only by that. The way he had 'imself cobbled up—them clothes and spec's and whiskers, and the way 'e talked, and 'is face puckered up the way 'e kep' it—he didn't look a bit more like Ken Colin than you do. Stay here, and I'll send Al up with Doctor Arnold's stretcher t' hep' y' carry 'im in."

He stooped to straighten the dead man and—a subconscious act of compassion, perhaps—to get the cramped arm out from under him. As he moved the arm, the frock coat fell open and a piece of soiled white paper stuck in a pocket of the vest caught his eye.

He drew it forth, glanced over the dozen or so scrawled words and passed the paper to Uncle Nick. The old man, muttering something about not having his glasses along, passed it back and the woodsman read it aloud:

This man aint no preacher. Hes Slim Finger Doolin. Hes the slickest forger an counterfitter that ever lived and devilish light fingered with a six gun. He ruined my sister. Thats why hes dead. He aint no human. Hes got the guts of a snake and the devils blood. Thats why I knifed im stid uv shootin im white. It wont be no use follerin me cause yu wont ketch me.
Loge Belden.

A long silence followed the reading of the note. The woodsman was the first to break it.

"I ain't *aimin'* t' follow 'im," he said, while a spark of flint narrowed his eyes—"a man that'll back his sister like—that."

"I 'low he's about as black as the devil makes 'em," was the old hunter's thoughtful comment, as he slowly reached for his pipe, "but we'll haf t' consait 'im *one* white feather."

The younger man glanced at the body.

"Dern'd if I hain't a notion t' pull the door shet and leave 'im lay there and rot."

Uncle Nick held up his hand, the match between his fingers still unlighted.

"No, that wouldn't do, nuther," he said. "He's dead—and that sort o' cleans the slate. He'll haf t' be toted in, so I reckon y'u better send Al up with the stretcher, as y'u said, and I'll stay and 'ten' t' plantin' 'im."

He kicked Black Bogus's box to the open door, stood it on end, sat down and scraped his match on the door-jamb.

With a final word of caution to keep secret the identity of the dead man, the woodsman hurried away through the dew-wet weeds to the road, vaulted the fence and set off on the run to the village.

At the inquest an hour or so later—held in all possible quietness on account of the sufferer—Jack merely repeated the statement he had made the night before. Of Loge Belden and his sister—knowing at last her pitiful secret, and remembering the scene under the window—he let fall no word. The house-boat, when he went to its hiding-place days later, had disappeared. They had probably gone with it. They were never followed.

CHAPTER XXIX

SEARCH OF THE LANGUID EYES

ALL through the long and terrible day following that tragic night, the angels of life and death waged their grim struggle in the parlor bedroom, where the hapless sufferer writhed in the delirium that followed the shock of her wound.

Toward evening Aunt Liza, believing with the others that the end was near, beckoned the woodsman to the bedside.

It fairly staggered him to see the frightful change the hours had wrought. Under an impulse of pity that he could not resist he bent over the bed, caught up her hands and spoke her name. She instantly grew more quiet and turned her face toward his voice.

The doctor was quick to notice this, and at his direction Jack dropped on his knees by the bedside and began talking to her, softly stroking

her hands and wrists and face the while; and as he talked she grew calmer.

"She seems to half recognize you," the doctor whispered. "If we could only get her quiet for a few hours—it's better than medicine—and her life hangs by the merest thread."

So the man knelt to his task, stroking her hands and face, talking to her and crooning over, in a voice that finally drifted into a sort of restful sing-song, scenes familiar to them both—the flowers; the woods; Black Rock; Whispering Spring—everything memory could supply or imagination suggest.

"Merciful God!" moaned Mrs. Curry, slipping from the room with her apron over her face, "I ain't hear'd that talk sence they wus children."

Hour after hour the man knelt and crooned the story of their playmate days, while the doctor plied his utmost art and the women lavished their care.

Late that night she seemed to quiet away into a light sleep. A smile struggled out upon the doctor's grim features and he went out into the yard for a moment of relaxation. The woodsman laid the girl's hands down upon the covers, rose to his feet, stumbled out to the kitchen and dropped down on a chair by the cook stove.

Barely a minute after, Aunt Liza, sleepless and faithful, tapped him on the shoulder.

"She's frettin' ag'in."

He sprang up and hurried to the sick-room. But before he reached the bedside her tossing had ceased and she lay back against the pillow still and white. He caught up her hands; they were so cold it startled him.

At that moment the doctor came back in. The instant he entered the room the unusual stillness—or the instinct of his profession—must have warned him that something was amiss, for he hurried to the bedside and bent a keen look upon the patient.

"Quick!" he cried, tearing open his medicine-case—"hot cloths—the crisis is here."

Instantly every one was in eager activity.

"Her han's are like ice," the woodsman faltered.

"She's sinking fast," was the doctor's answer, as he made ready a powerful stimulant. "Rub her hands and wrists and temples—rub toward the heart—and try to call her back with some more of that Black Rock and Whispering Spring talk. And be quick with those hot cloths, you women. If we can only keep breath in her for the next hour—"

The woodsman, toiling with gray and graven face, was the first to notice the clamminess leaving her hands and a faint tinge of color beginning to drive the chill out of her fingers. The doctor bent low over her, noted the respiration, took the pulse again.

"She's got a chance," he muttered. "Keep on with that talk, Warhope, and rub her wrists and temples—and come on with more hot cloths, the rest of you."

Nearly an hour had gone when the girl's lids fluttered apart and the brilliant eyes strayed open—weak, haggard, but no longer wild and vacant with delirium.

Slowly the eyes traveled over the room, a languid questioning in them; searched the faces about her; dwelt at last upon the face of the woodsman.

"Jack"—it was only a whisper, fluttering out upon the labored breath, but it was the sweetest sound his ears had ever heard—"he didn't—kill y'u—"

He dropped on one knee by the bedside, but dared not trust his voice with a word.

She lay looking at him, faintly curious, until, as fuller consciousness returned, he saw a question grow and deepen in her eyes.

"Jack—what—what—?"

He brought his face close.

"You've be'n sick—bad—and we're all tryin' t' coax y'u back well. When y'u git strong, we'll have a long talk—you and me—but now, won't y'u jist try t' go t' sleep? Won't y'u?"

"Yes," she whispered, like a trusting child—"I'm so—tired—"

One hand stole across the covers and hunted his; the long lashes drooped over the languid eyes and she slipped away to sleep. The others tiptoed from the room.

"What she needs above everything," muttered the doctor, softly closing the door—"sleep—it will do her more good right now than all the medicine in the world."

And there Jack crouched—himself bruised and worn—afraid to move with her hand in his, lest she start awake and so lose one moment of the rest just then precious beyond calculation. Only a man of his superb physical powers could have held the cramped, uncomfortable pose so long.

Several times one of the women, and once the doctor, softly opened the door and peeped in, but they as often closed it again and left the man to his silent vigil.

CHAPTER XXX

HEART OF THE FLATWOODS

WHAT cared the red-roofed cottage next morning that the sun curled up its shingles as he drank the dew, for the syringas were in their glory; the rose-buds beginning to reveal their mysteries; a thousand bees set the orchard a-hum; the apple blossoms still snowed white the grass; the woods were flinging forth their banners; and, in the giant maple at Whispering Spring, a great wonder had happened to the mocking-bird's nest—a wonder that he had hurried to the top-most twig to tell the world about.

But best of all—the key and clue to all the joy in the heart of the happy cottage—in the cool parlor bedroom Texie had found her way back out of the shadows.

By the next day she was so much better that the doctor declared her out of danger—time alone being all that was necessary to bring her well.

In the serene evening the sun peeped under the porch roof for one last look before reluctantly passing on to less interesting scenes beyond the gates of the west; fell in at the open parlor window; crossed the floor and just missed the big old-fashioned sofa, soft and cozy with blankets, where the woodsman had carried the girl in his great arms, the wonderful landscape of lawn and bottoms and winding river spreading before her.

The woodsman himself sat on a low footstool at her side. The room had settled still. With his chin in his propped-up palm, he gazed out into the mellow bronze of the wide landscape—the wonder of it all; that she was there; that she had found her way back out of the shadows.

From the kitchen came the low drone of voices where Mrs. Curry and Aunt Liza sat by the cook stove. A tall old clock in a corner of the parlor—taller than the woodsman himself, with a peasant man and maid on the face raking hay—punctuated the silence into a sort of drowsy rhythm.

The girl was so still that he thought she slept. Glancing around at her, he was amazed to see her eyes full of tears.

"W'y—what's the matter—?"

"Nothing—!"

Her lips quivered; she turned her face away and cried silently. He picked up her hand; attempted a comforting word. The sprawled dead figure in the old cabin crossed his mind—the brother in whom she still believed; whose death she still mourned; of whose degradation and deep dishonor she was haply spared from ever knowing—and the attempt failed.

She turned back to him after a time, brushed away the tears and a brave suggestion of the smile that made her eyes so wonderful brightened them.

"Ain't it jist terrible f'r me t' cry like this, when y'u're all s' good to me!"

The tears had hurt him; the smile hurt him more—the attempt of a brave soul to rise superior to its double sorrow.

He hitched the footstool closer to the sofa. It surprised him to feel a queer weakness in his breast and a tightness in his throat when he tried to speak.

"Do y' think y'u're strong enough t' talk—some?"

"W'y, I could git up—a'most."

A sudden thoughtfulness displaced the smile.

"Do y'u remember that letter y'u give me from Pap Simon las' Saturd'y?"

The girl raised her eyes.

"T' be opened the day you're twenty-one—I've wondered and wondered what was in it."

He looked down at the floor; looked up again.

"This is the day."

"No!"

"I'm twenty-one t'-day—and"—free, he was about to say, but didn't.

"Is it possible it's only be'n six days sence—"

"Six days," was his slow comment. "Don't seem like s' much *could* happen in six days—hardly—"

He fumbled in his blouse; took out the letter in its formidable envelope; held it toward her.

She took it and, glancing over it, handed it back. He tore it open and drew out its contents.

Wide-eyed, they read it through—a title deed in fee simple to the Warhope homestead, together with all stock and betterments and growing crops thereon, duly conveyed and executed to Jack Warhope; and, folded inside the deed, a bank draft in his favor for ten thousand dollars.

The man stared at the girl; the girl stared at the man.

"I'm b'lievin' Pap Simon meant t' do this all along," he mused at last. "I can see it now, as I look back. That's why he was s' good to me. Mebbe"—he hesitated, "that's why he had me—bound—"

"Pore father!"—the girl's eyes strayed away to where the silver contour of the river rimmed the bottoms—"it was his—way."

He let loose of the deed, leaving it in her hand. She turned back from the silver-rimmed bottoms and glanced it over again.

"W'y, it was made out only last Friday—he never knowed it, but that was lady-slipper day;—and so he made it a—big day—after all—"

Very slowly, with the tightness still at his throat, the woodsman took out his pocketbook and laid a flattened yellow orchid in the girl's palm.

"I found it there at the edge of Mud Haul where you got on the house-boat."

The girl fumbled the flattened blossom in her hand; the color of returning health tingled into her cheeks.

"The one you found that—day," she stam-

mered. She lifted a tiny glance up to him from under her long lashes; let her eyes stray far out across the bottoms toward Alpine Island. "Pore—Ken! Hopkins met me up the road and told me he was sick on the boat. I didn't know, Hopkins—then."

"I did—and I knowed Brickbat Alley. That's why I rode after y'u the minute I got yu'r note. Hopkins was a—bad man, but we've already talked about him, and what b'come of him. All that money he stol'd I—tuck away from 'im at the parsonage the evening of the—funeral, and drove 'im out o' Flatwoods. That's why he went, and all that stuff he told y'u about—Ken was jist lies. I've got all that money hid, and we'll put it back in the safe as soon as you're able t' open it."

The eyes came back from the distant point where Alpine Island split the silver rim of the bottoms.

"I know now that what he said was all lies, but I didn't then. As soon as I got on the boat I saw—Ken wasn't there, but Hopkins locked the door and wouldn't let me off. And such a cabin as that house-boat had—tight as a jail. He made all the apologies a man could f'r raisin'

false hopes about—Ken, and told me he'd done it all f'r my own good. Then he told me there was two men plannin' to rob the safe that night and he'd brung me on the boat t' git me out o' danger."

She paused; looked at the man; went on.

"He said he was goin' t' git you t' he'p 'im and you'd both watch the house, and after the danger was over you'd come and bring me home. He said one o' the robbers would be Slim Finger Doolin, the most dangerous pistol fighter in the world. I asked 'im how 'e found it all out—not knowin' then that he 'imself was Slim Finger Doolin—but he said he'd rather tell me all about it next day. From that minute I was afear'd of him, though he was as polite and respectful to me as 'e could be, short of lettin' me go."

She felt the eyes of the woodsman upon her. He looked away and she went on.

"From that minute I mistrusted *he* was one o' the robbers, though I never let on, and as soon as he was gone I tried all I could t' git out. I was afear'd"—she looked down at the blanket; crumpled a corner of it hard in her fingers—"you might chance t' hear 'em, and I knowed if y'u did you'd fight, and I was half wild f'r fear

they'd kill y'u. Oh, if I'd only knowed it was you that moved the boat!—Jack why *didn't* y'u let me out—!”

The man stared at the floor and twisted his great hands till the knuckles turned white.

“God!” he groaned—“if I only had! But I thought you'd be safest there. It was the worst mistake I ever made in my life—that and lettin' Hopkins preach Pap Simon's—funeral, but I didn't have no good proof on 'im then.”

The girl glanced at his bowed form. The tick of the tall old clock in the corner throbbed loud on the silence; through the open window came the call of crows flying home.

“It was away in the night,” the girl went on at last, thoughtful and slow, “b'fore I fin'ly got out by beatin' a hole in the roof with a stove leg, swum ashore and run home as fast as I could. I'd jist got in the yard when I saw you a-standin' there by the winder. Then come that shot and I thought Slim Finger Doolin had—killed y'u. I don't know what happened after—that—”

“After that,” the man echoed, his voice low and broken, “we've all be'n tryin' t' coax the bravest and most wonderful girl in the world back to life.”

“Life!” she murmured, as if the word came

new and strange to her after being so fearfully close to death. "Oh, I want so much t' have it all back ag'in—"

"And y'u shall have it back!" the man cried, catching the appeal in her voice. "You've got it now. Every breath brings the woods and hills, the sunshine and flowers, jist that much nearer—w'y, you're as good as well this very minute."

She must have caught the boundless cheer in his voice, or felt it in his hands as he raised her shoulders for a brief instant to smooth the pillows, for the smile in her eyes came alive again, stole out over her face and brought back a heartening suggestion of the dimples.

By some intangible bridge all unseen of human eyes, the smile found its way across to the man's grave and serious face; kindled it—like the glint of morning upon the front of Black Rock.

He picked up her hand; touched the faded orchid in her palm.

"I 'low y'u ain't f'rgot the day we—I—found it—"

He felt the twitch of her fingers.

"I tried t' ask y'u t'—promise me—that day;—I'm askin' y'u t'—promise me—now—"

It was the biggest word he had ever said in his life. Much like a man who had committed a crime and awaited his sentence, he raised his head; ventured a glance at the girl.

Something very wonderful had come to her face—like the birth of morning; and her eyes like star trails—a marvelous transfiguration that only one thing in the world can bring.

He slipped from the footstool and knelt down by her side; her arm came up off the blanket and hunted its way across his massive shoulders.

The peasant man and maid on the face of the old clock in the corner smiled, raking hay.

THE END

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